

CINEASTE

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Daniel Day-Lewis

Jia Zhangke

John Sayles

Cristian Mungiu



Students in Emory University's graduate program in Film Studies explore American and international film, with particular emphasis on non-Hollywood (animation, avant-garde, documentary, Japanese, Western European, Eastern European, Soviet and post-Soviet, and Latin American) cinemas. Students benefit from a small program situated within a major research university—an environment that fosters close mentoring and encourages an innovative, individually tailored course of study. Emory and Atlanta offer a number of special screenings, guest speakers and film festivals throughout the year.

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CORE FACULTY

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent*, (1994, 2000); *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, (1997); *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, (1999); *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era*, (2001); *Screening a Lynching: The Leo Frank Case on Film and TV* (2008).

KARLA OELER *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form* (2008).

EDDY VON MUELLER "The Acme Aesthetic: Violence, Visual Effects and the Impact of Animation on Contemporary Cinema," Ph.D. Diss., Emory University, (2006).

DAVID B. PRATT "Fit food for madhouse inmates': The German Film Invasion of 1920-1922", Ph.D. Diss, Emory University, (2004).

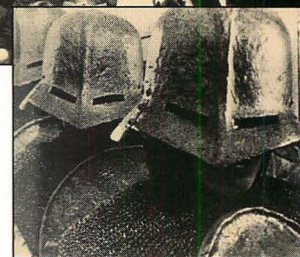
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ARTICLES

The Outsider:

Themes from the Work of Daniel Day-Lewis by Andrew Hedden

His fierce and insightful performance as relentless oilman Daniel Plainview in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* confirms Daniel Day-Lewis as one of the finest film actors working today. Psychically as well as physically the performer transforms himself into his characters, and in the process continually redefines the outsider's relationship with society, which the author explores through his roles since his debut in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. 8

From *The Celluloid Closet* to *Brokeback Mountain*:

The Changing Nature of Queer Film Criticism by Michael Bronski

The cultural ascent of *Brokeback Mountain* has permanently altered the landscape for queer cinema, Michael Bronski argues in a look back at pioneer gay/lesbian film critics and a review of three new books at the cusp of change in queer cinema studies and film criticism. 22

Good Moments in a Tough World:

The Films of Charles Burnett by Clifford Thompson

For thirty years, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* was fated to be more written about than actually seen. A two-disc DVD set has brought the celebrated work to light, along with Burnett's *My Brother's Wedding* and four of his short films, enabling the author to find compelling new facets to Burnett's milestone achievements. 32

INTERVIEWS

Don't Make Your Dreams Too Small:

An Interview with John Sayles by Dan Georgakas

A career-length retrospective of his films since *Return of the Secaucus 7* in 1980 gave the writer-director an opportunity for a look back at fertile collaborations on projects like *Passion Fish* and *Limbo*. Sayles discusses his new film, *Honeydripper*, in the context of the crowded marketplace today in which independent films must compete. 14

Working with John Sayles: An Interview

with David Strathairn and Chris Cooper by Dan Georgakas

Oscar winner Chris Cooper and Oscar nominee David Strathairn, who made their film debuts in John Sayles-directed features (*Matewan* and *Return of the Secaucus 7*, respectively), discuss his working methods and cutting their "cinematic teeth" on his films. 20

Surviving a Futile War:

An Interview with Joseph Cedar by Leonard Quart

Beaufort, the newest film from Israeli director Joseph Cedar, is an Academy Award nominee this year for Best Foreign Language film. How a sense of history informs the film, thoughts on the ongoing Israel-Lebanon conflict, and the influence of classic war films are part of a talk with its cowriter and director. 27

Not Just an Abortion Film:

An Interview with Cristian Mungiu by Richard Porton

The Cannes Palme d'Or-winning *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* has been hotly discussed as an abortion film, but its writer-director sees it more as a depiction of national hardship during the Ceausescu regime, where choice of any kind was limited. 35

Status and Morality in *Cassandra's Dream*:

An Interview with Woody Allen by Cynthia Lucia

The homicidal side of the writer-director, most recently on view in *Match Point*, resurfaces again in his latest film, with a different fate in store for two brothers up to no good in upwardly mobile London. Allen talks about plotting murder, his rare use of a composer (Philip Glass) as an accomplice, and his "lazy" filmmaking style. 40

Still Lives in Times of Change:

An Interview with Jia Zhangke by Jared Rapfogel

In his feature *Still Life*, which takes place at the site of the mammoth Three Gorges Dam project, in his documentary *Useless* and earlier features such as *Platform* and *The World*, the director continues to chart the epic growth of his native China. Jia discusses the toll of destruction and the prospects of renewal. 44

Cover: Daniel Day-Lewis as Daniel Plainview in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*.

FILM REVIEWS

Charlie Wilson's War

Reviewed by Robert Sklar.....48

Terror's Advocate

Reviewed by Alexander Zevin.....50

Alexandra

Reviewed by Megan Ratner.....52

The Year My Parents

Went on Vacation
Reviewed by Karen Backstein.....54

Funny Games

Reviewed by Robert Koehler.....55

The Witnesses

Reviewed by Jonathan Murray.....57

DVD REVIEWS

Les Enfants terribles

Reviewed by David Sterritt.....60

American Silent Horror Collection

Reviewed by Michael Bronski.....61

The Milky Way

Reviewed by John Calhoun.....64

I Am Cuba: The Ultimate Edition

Reviewed by Rahul Hamid.....65

Ace in the Hole

Reviewed by Robert Sklar.....67

Saoirse?

Reviewed by Michael Gray.....68

Staff Recommendations:

A Cottage on Dartmoor, Cría cuervos,

The Ear, Eyes Wide Shut and Hearts of

Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse

Reviewed by Cineaste Editors.....70

BOOK REVIEWS

It's All True: Orson Welles's

Pan-American Odyssey

Discovering Orson Welles

Reviewed by Sidney Gottlieb.....72

Mario Bava:

All the Colors of the Dark

Reviewed by Robert Cashill.....75

Miracles and Sacrilege: Roberto

Rossellini, the Church, and Film

Censorship in Hollywood

Hollywood's Censor

Banned in Kansas: Motion

Picture Censorship, 1915-1966

Reviewed by Doug Dibbern.....76

Orwell Subverted: The CIA

and the Filming of Animal Farm

Reviewed by Susan Ryan.....77

COMMUNIQUÉS

The Thessaloniki Film Festival

by Dan Georgakas.....80

The Gijón Film Festival

by Dennis West.....81

DEPARTMENTS

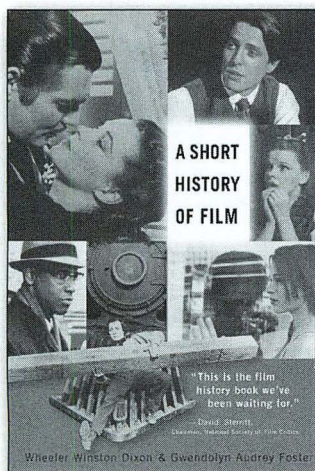
Web Exclusives Table of Contents....4

Editorial.....6

Contributors.....83

Letters to the Editor.....84

Short Takes.....88



A Short History of Film **WHEELER WINSTON DIXON** **AND GWENDOLYN** **AUDREY FOSTER**

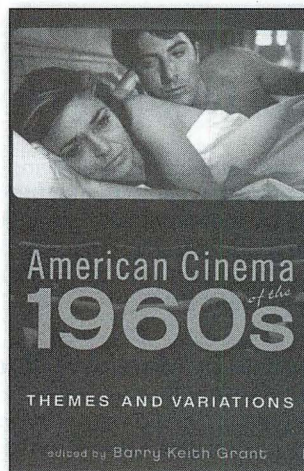
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American Cinema **of the 1960s**

Themes and Variations

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BARRY KEITH GRANT

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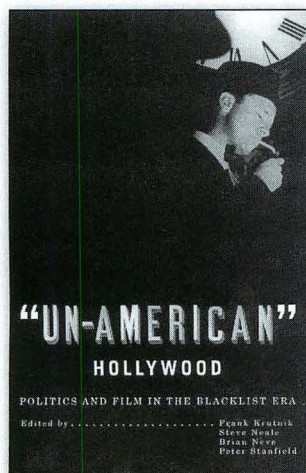
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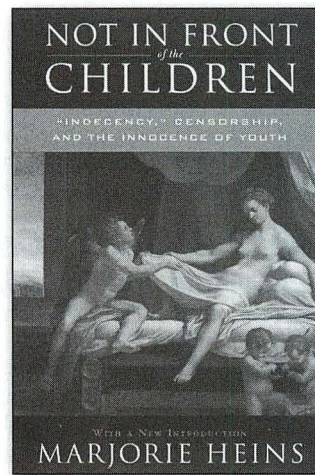
"This collection of essays represents the work of a new generation of historians who have made discoveries in the study of films from the Blacklist era which demand our attention."—John Belton, author of *American Cinema/American Culture*

"*Un-American Hollywood* reopens the intense critical debate on the

blacklist era and on the aesthetic and political work of the Hollywood Left. In a series of fresh case studies focusing on contexts of production and reception, the contributors offer exciting and original perspectives on the role of progressive politics within a capitalist media industry.

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New York University

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***The Counterfeiters:* An Interview with Stefan Ruzowitzky**

by David Archibald

The true story of how the Nazis used a master counterfeiter and other larcenous prisoners at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp to plot the collapse of the U.S. and British economies, and the efforts by the inmates to delay the plan, comes to the screen in an Academy Award-nominated foreign-language film from Austria. In adapting the account, its writer-director says it was "the right combination of a thrilling emotional story and a political statement."

Samuel Fuller Begins Reviewed by Martha P. Nochimson

The author punches through "The First Films of Samuel Fuller," a Criterion Eclipse DVD set bundling *I Shot Jesse James* (1949), *The Baron of Arizona* (1950), and *The Steel Helmet* (1951), then takes a crack at a reissue of the filmmaker's 1944 novel, *The Dark Page*. The upshot: "Long time admirers of Fuller's often praised raw visual sense as a filmmaker will be astonished at how much more at home he is in print than on screen, certainly at the beginning of his career."

European Short Films: Special U.S. Edition

Reviewed by David Sterritt

British distributor Cinema 16 enters the American market with a two-disc DVD collecting sixteen shorts made between 1958 and 2005, including budding boldface names Ridley Scott's *Boy and Bicycle*, Christopher Nolan's *Doodlebug*, Lars Von Trier's *Nocturne*, and Martin McDonagh's Oscar-winning *Six Shooter*. "Done well, the short-film DVD is a tremendous boon," says the author. "So all hail Cinema 16, a British distribution company that has been doing it well since 2003."

***The Great Debaters* Reviewed by Herb Boyd**

"For all the nitpicking, *The Great Debaters* is a special film," the author writes of director and costar Denzel Washington's fact-based portrayal of how debating society students at all-black Wiley College in Texas broke color barriers on their way to a final showdown with Harvard in the Depression era. Nevertheless, some of Washington's choices in bringing this milestone episode to the screen (including the downplaying of his character's radical politics) are open to debate.

Raymond Bernard on DVD: *Wooden Crosses* and *Les Misérables* Reviewed by Phillip Lopate

Criterion Eclipse has resurrected the career of the unsung French *auteur* with a new release of two films, acclaimed in their time, that are largely forgotten today. *Wooden Crosses* (1932) is an unflinching look at a French regiment during the First World War, and the 1934 Hugo adaptation, clocking in at nearly five hours, is "by far the finest version" of the oft-told epic saga. "Together they make a compelling case for admission into the canon of great filmmakers," the author writes.

Lost and Found: The Harry Langdon Collection

Reviewed by James L. Neibaur

A four-disc DVD set "makes a strong case in support of Langdon as deserving a firm and lofty position among the silent screen's finest comedians," the author writes in sizing up a collection of all his existing short films from his peak in 1924-1926, plus home movies and later work in the sound era. Though disparaged by collaborators who included Frank Capra, the baby-faced child man's unique persona is ripe for reexamination.

Now in Theaters and New on DVD

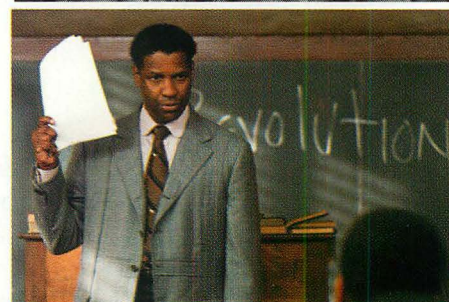
In this new section we are offering a review of Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's visually striking adaptation of Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis*. James Mangold's *3:10 to Yuma* hit DVD shelves in January and we have an interview with the director. For the twentieth anniversary edition of Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*, we are republishing our talk with Stone from 1988, shortly after the film was released.



The Counterfeiters



Sam Fuller's The Steel Helmet



The Great Debaters



Raymond Bernard's Wooden Crosses



The Harry Langdon Collection

Film & Media Studies

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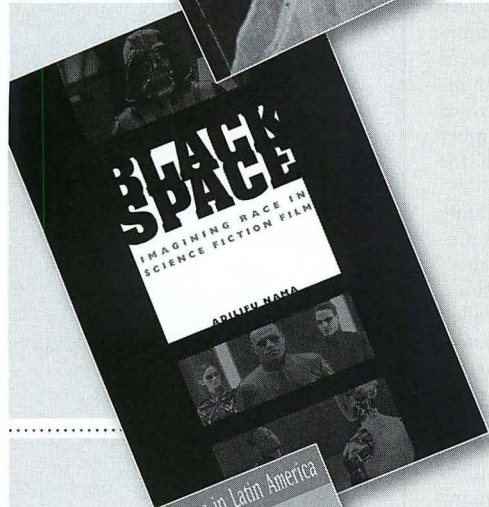
DIVA By Angela Dalle Vacche • Foreword by Guy Maddin **Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema**

"*Diva* is a phenomenally rich archival, cultural, and theoretical source regarding early Italian cinema most specifically and European modernity in the early twentieth century more generally. Few film histories offer this kind of intellectual range, and I eagerly anticipate this book's impact on the field and its reverberation among other related disciplines."

—Jennifer M. Bean, Director of Cinema Studies and Associate Professor of Cinema Studies and Comparative Literature, University of Washington

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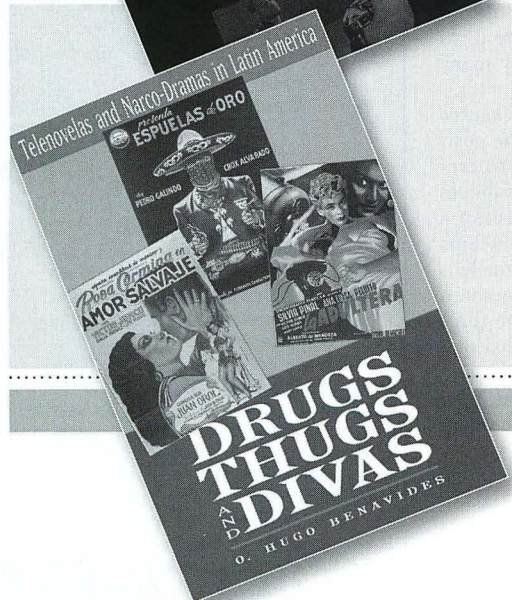


BLACK SPACE By Adilifu Nama **Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film**

"*Black Space* stands as fresh, insightful work that fills an obvious and significant gap in the critical and theoretical discussion of the African American absence/presence (along with the broader issues of *race* and *difference*) in science fiction cinema. Besides the occasional anthology essay or journal article, I can think of no work by a single author that presents such sustained, 'cover to cover' discussion of this vital and underexplored area in black representation."

—Ed Guerrero, New York University, author of *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* and *Do the Right Thing*, as well as many essays and articles on black cinema and its culture and politics

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DRUGS, THUGS, AND DIVAS By O. Hugo Benavides **Telenovelas and Narco-Dramas in Latin America**

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—Ruby Tapia, Assistant Professor of Comparative Studies, Ohio State University

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EDITORIAL

Pregnancy Test: The Politics of the Personal

The critical controversy sparked last year by two box-office hits about pregnancy, *Juno* and *Knocked Up*, centers on how the films represent—or fail to represent—abortion as a considered option for their unexpectedly expectant female protagonists. Those defending the movies dismiss critics worried about “the A-word” status to which both films delimit abortion, accusing naysayers of demanding a political statement from “personal,” “apolitical” stories, that are, after all, merely comedies. Although *Cineaste* appreciates the humor, clever dialog, and engaging performances, especially in *Juno*, we also worry not only about critical arguments that seem either willfully blind or shockingly naïve about the mediating role of cinema in our culture, but also about the aversion to abortion as an important issue. While the majority of Americans are prochoice, for example, an increasing discomfort—whether spoken or unspoken—with the abortion option seems evident on the part of many filmmakers.

With the antichoice movement waging unrelenting attacks on abortion rights and winning the 2003 ban on the strategically termed “partial birth abortion,” a label that has stuck thanks to the vigorous efforts of the Bush Administration, whose antiabortion agenda has placed us one Supreme Court Justice away from the possible reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, films that seem reluctant or even squeamish about the mere mention of abortion tend to reinforce and extend this cultural unease. The Religious New Right, it would seem, has successfully obtruded their opposition onto the larger public consciousness, where, outside of overtly feminist discourse, abortion mostly exists on a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” basis—with no acknowledgement of what it means when a woman loses the legal right to control her own body. Although *Knocked Up* director Judd Apatow and *Juno*’s director Jason Reitman and screenwriter Diablo Cody have repeatedly asserted their prochoice positions, their films imply something larger at work.

When the sixteen-year-old Juno visits an abortion clinic, she encounters a self-involved, punked-out receptionist only a few years her senior—something not even remotely resembling most abortion clinics, where, increasingly, employees are putting their safety and even their lives on the line to support women and ensure that they will have sterile, safe procedures. While Juno’s feisty line when she calls the clinic, saying, “I’d like to procure a hasty abortion,” does play for laughs, for many viewers the clinic scene doesn’t. While the scene involving the lone protestor Juno encounters outside the clinic, a classmate who moves fluidly from asserting that “God appreciates your miracle” to asking Juno about their math class, does play for laughs, her pivotal comment that changes Juno’s mind—that the fetus already has fingernails—plays like antiabortion propaganda, providing all sorts of emotionally-charged

details about early fetal development. Is it perhaps a bit disingenuous, then, given the current political climate, when director Reitman claims that he was drawn to Cody’s screenplay because, “You never really see politics in any of the choices, any of the conversations, any of the moves”?

Equally disingenuous is the approach in Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up*. The incongruity of a beautiful blonde career woman trying to “make it work,” after a one-night stand with a jobless but good-at-heart slacker, does play for laughs. The fact, however, that an aspiring TV journalist dismisses abortion after only a brief conversation with her mother, who supports the idea of “taking care” of the pregnancy but is shown as a somewhat negative character, strikes a deeply dishonest chord, as the film contorts its story in order to avoid literally even mentioning abortion. While it may be that the slacker’s media-savvy friends make a knowing joke about the reluctance of the media at large to use the A-word, their quip that the thing they’re referring to rhymes with “smushmortion” calls upon an image equally consistent with antiabortion propaganda. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the camouflage word is, nevertheless, revealing (why not any number of other invented words—“promortion,” for instance?).

Apatow claims that he did film a very funny scene, allowing his actors to improvise (his preferred working method) on the subject of abortion, but it ended up on the cutting room floor, with Apatow kidding that it would have killed Jerry Falwell. Though it’s unlikely that Apatow had Falwell in mind as an audience member, his comment nevertheless betrays a reluctance to offend sensibilities in a culture he perceives as offended by abortion. We have only to acknowledge the guarded praise for the films and their perceived antichoice stance by many conservative Christian groups.

Some might claim that *Juno* and *Knocked Up* attest to (and indirectly celebrate) the positive state that feminism has struggled to create—the stories would have been impossible to conceive in a world where abortion was not a legal and available option (though it seems rather more available to Juno than it actually is to a sixteen-year-old girl living in Minnesota). We, at *Cineaste*, are concerned that the films take this option so completely for granted that they manage to appear both profeminist and prochoice while also, if not antiabortion, then at least very uncomfortable with it. Though of different genres, Mike Leigh’s *Vera Drake* (2004) and the recently released *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, by Romanian filmmaker Cristian Mungiu (interviewed in this issue), remind us of a time when abortion was neither legal nor available but nevertheless pursued with unhappy or tragic consequences for the women involved—something we would hope that even comedy filmmakers would try to remember.

—The Editors

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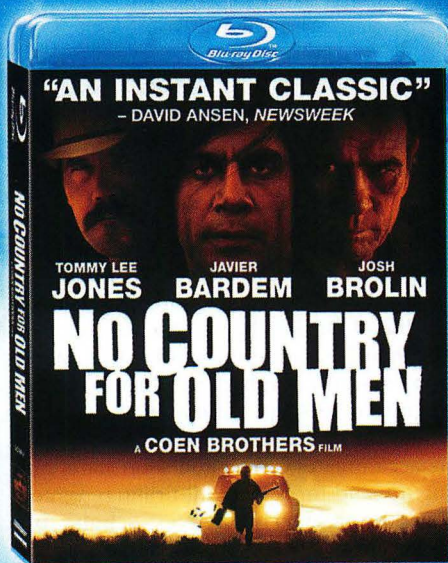
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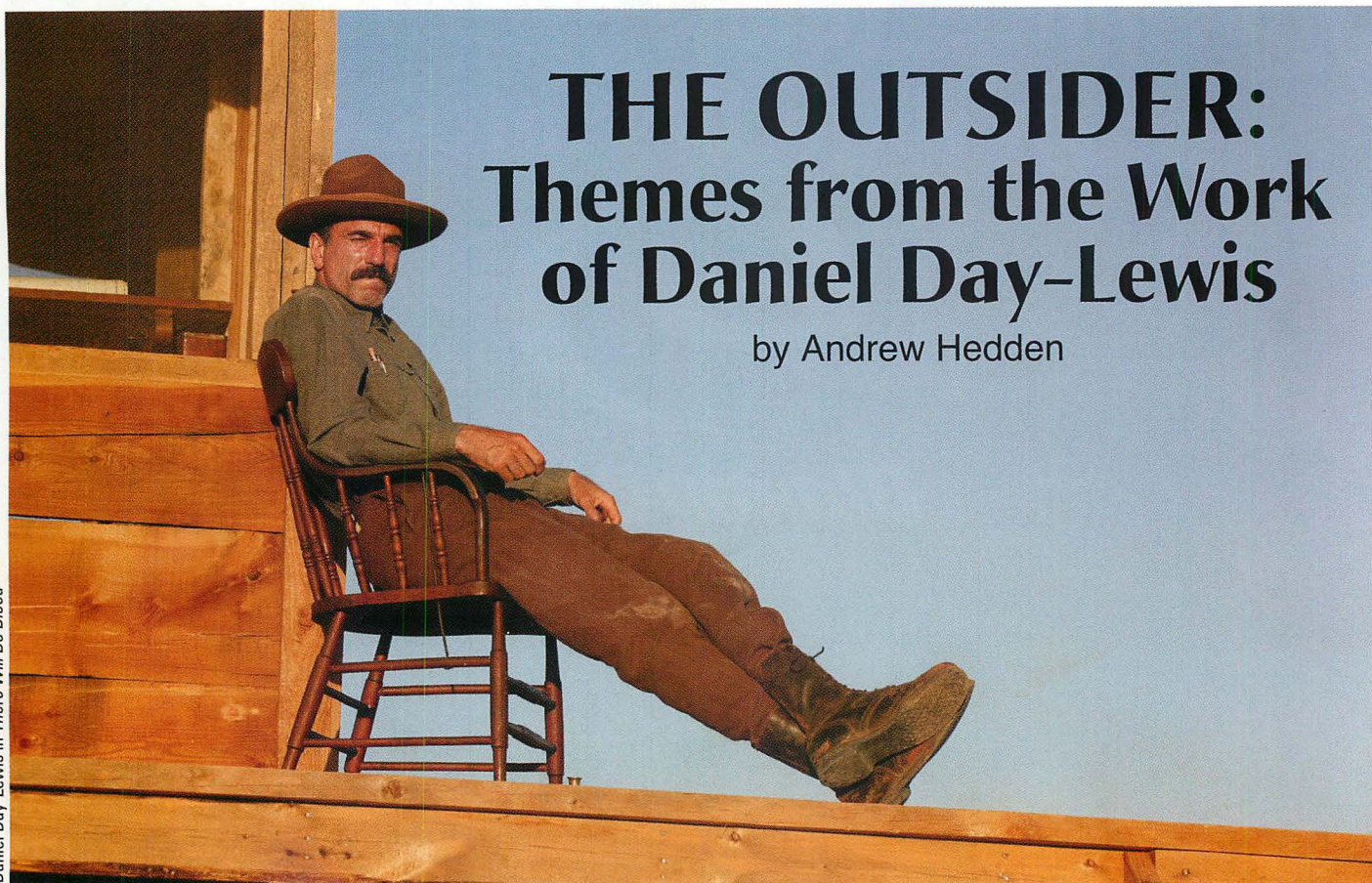
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THE OUTSIDER: Themes from the Work of Daniel Day-Lewis

by Andrew Hedden

In the final scene of *There Will Be Blood*, Daniel Day-Lewis drools. Just once for a moment. He doesn't drool like a child, or like an old man—though the scene finds his character at the end of a long life. Day-Lewis drools rabidly in mid-bark, like a Doberman, mean and mad, venting the rage that will eventually make good on the promise of the film's title. It is the penultimate scene of a performance that has left critics themselves drooling over Day-Lewis in their year-end wrap-ups and accolades. Awards for his work in *There Will Be Blood* have poured in from critics' circles on both coasts and everywhere in between—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Phoenix, Austin—and bets are good that the awards season won't close out without an Oscar to add to his Screen Actors Guild and Golden Globe awards for Best Actor.

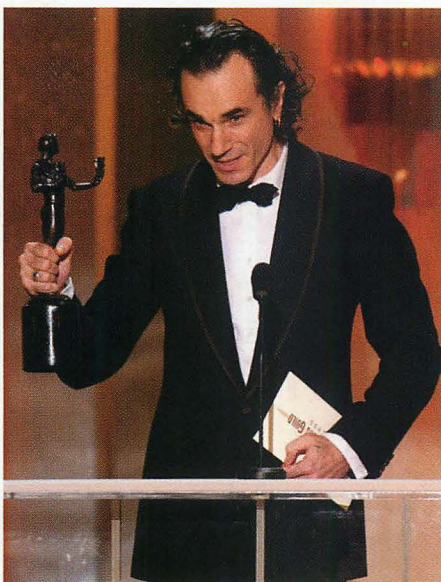
So what has the critics drooling? In some ways, it is hard to say. Whereas the awards have been more than forthcoming, less so has been analysis of Day-Lewis's performance. That reward has fallen instead to *There Will Be Blood* writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson whose themes, influences, and previous work have all been given due critical consideration in reviews. Day-Lewis, on the other hand, garners frequent nods as a "great actor," but less space is devoted to his own contribution to *There Will Be Blood*, especially how the film fits well within the themes of his twenty-year-plus career as a screen actor.

There Will Be Blood follows Day-Lewis in the life of Daniel Plainview, a self-described "oil man" running oil prospecting operations in sunny Southern California. The film begins in 1898 as Plainview successfully mines for silver, then strikes the black gold; he accumulates capital and soon starts buying up land for further oil drilling. An accident on a derrick leaves a baby boy

orphaned, and Plainview adopts him. The film then jumps ahead to 1911 as Plainview proposes a land purchase to a town hall crowd, his young son standing beside him, proclaiming, "I run a family business."

On the surface, *There Will Be Blood* is another of the actor's trademark makeovers, chock-full of novelty. Like usual, Day-Lewis looks his part—and walks and talks it too. Maybe he's worn a thick moustache and a greasy face in a role before, but never in this particular time and place, never in such a suit coat with a narrow timepiece dangling in front. Sitting at the town hall meeting, several pens burn a figurative hole in his front pocket awaiting contractual dotted-lines to sign, while a wide-brimmed hat sits on his head to protect from another burning heat, that of the Southwestern sun. When Plainview talks, complaining about the crowd, his voice is deep, authoritative, impatient, coarse, and above all, absolutely distinctive, having drawn frequent comparisons to that of the late director John Huston. When Plainview strikes out of the meeting and into the night, Day-Lewis affects a striding gait, hunched over with shoulders slightly raised, swinging arms at each side; he walks with conviction but also evinces a slight hobble, remnants of an early mining accident that stays in Day-Lewis's performance until the end of the film.

The character of Daniel Plainview is the sort of physical transformation Day-Lewis has been renowned for, at least since 1985,



Daniel Day-Lewis accepts his Screen Actors Guild Award for Best Male Actor for *There Will Be Blood* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

when *My Beautiful Laundrette* opened in theaters opposite *A Room with a View*. Audiences watching Day-Lewis play Johnny, a gay ex-skinhead, in *Laundrette* could hardly believe it was the same actor playing an effete Edwardian dandy in *A Room with a View*. Later on, as Day-Lewis took on starring roles, media stories emerged—undoubtedly encouraged by studio press junkets—dishing on the actor's intensity: sitting in a wheelchair for weeks in *My Left Foot*; being in jail for days for *In the Name of the Father*; skinning deer, carving a canoe, doing it all backwoods style for *The Last of the Mohicans*. It wasn't long before a quick succession of clichés clung to Day-Lewis in the press for every new film in which he appeared—“chameleonlike,” “extreme,” “the British De Niro”—clichés usually only matched in their superficiality by endless speculation about his personal life.¹

They are clichés the actor has resisted. As Day-Lewis warned *The Ottawa Citizen* newspaper upon the release of *My Left Foot* in 1989, “It’s a temptation, and a dangerous one, to be involved with the outside signs of change.” In the case of *My Left Foot*, Day-Lewis frequently expressed concern in interviews that tales of his preparation for the role of Christy Brown, the Irish poet and painter with cerebral palsy, would overshadow the far greater importance of Brown’s story. One could extend the same concern to Day-Lewis’s career in general. Studios and media routinely emphasize selective elements of Day-Lewis’s life and work.² In doing so, they draw attention away from the importance of what appears on-screen, his performances’ numerous continuities from film to film, and the actor’s own explanations of his work.³ Ultimately, the significance of Day-Lewis’s performances lies less in how they look, or even in how he achieves them, but rather in the complexity of the individuals he portrays and the power of the stories they tell.

When Daniel Plainview proposes his oil deal to the town hall meeting early on in *There Will Be Blood*, the crowd loudly argues amongst themselves the merits of Plainview’s proposal. It proves too much for Plainview—“Too much confusion,” he says—so he walks out. But the confusion is only Plainview’s excuse. The real problem

is he’s an individual in society, and he can’t stand it. The man treats people as obstacles to navigate, a quality Day-Lewis indicates with a girded impatience, flexing his lower jaw and constantly chewing on something—most likely tobacco, but it could just as well be Plainview violently grinding his teeth, irritated at the impertinence of others getting in his way. He sees himself outside society, not within it; or better yet, he sees himself on the way out of society, boot-strap style, moving on up to something grander. There’s more than a little irony then when, in his movie-ending fit of rage, he mockingly barks, “I am the Third Revelation! I am who the lord has chosen!”

The actor's empathy with outcasts and instinct for storytelling drive *There Will Be Blood*, and also characterize many other performances throughout his critically acclaimed career.

Daniel Plainview is a variation on a theme present over the whole of Daniel Day-Lewis’s career, that of the estranged social outsider. Sometimes the estrangement is forced; sometimes, as in Plainview’s case, it is a choice (and an illusion). Often it is both. No matter what its origins, the theme of estrangement is present in literally every role he has played, from the homeless punk in *My Beautiful Laundrette* to the tragically out-of-touch Edwardian in *A Room with a View*. His first lead role as a libidinous Czech doctor in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) sees him banished from his country by the 1968 Soviet invasion, while Jack Slavin, Day-Lewis’s character in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose* (2005), is self-exiled, an aging idealist living out his final days on an old New England commune. In Day-

Lewis’s trilogy of Irish films with director Jim Sheridan—*My Left Foot*, *In the Name of the Father* (1993), and *The Boxer* (1997)—he plays misfits of one sort or another, not to mention the restless characters in his American pictures—*The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *The Crucible* (1996), and the two with Martin Scorsese, *Age of Innocence* (1993) and *Gangs of New York* (2002). Estrangement appears even in his early, little seen fish-out-of-water comedies *Stars and Bars* (1988) and *Eversmile, New Jersey* (1989). Altogether these films comprise his entire body of work from 1985 to the present.

Day-Lewis is routinely reticent when it comes to discussing his roles; each, he insists, has its own particularities. “In talking a character through, you define it,” he told *The New York Times Magazine* in 2007. “And if you define it, you kill it.” Asked in 1988 to explain Tomas, Day-Lewis’s character in *The Unbearable*

Lightness of Being, the actor responded similarly, almost verbatim, to the magazine *Film Comment*. “Tomas? It’s difficult. When you describe a character, you tend to restrict it, constrict the life of that person.” Day-Lewis is unafraid to note, however, that he is drawn to characters who share this very inability to articulate. “I am much more touched by people who have difficulties with [communicating],” Day-Lewis told *Rolling Stone* in 1990. “To varying degrees, we’re all incapable of communicating. It’s the thing that causes us the most distress, which forces us to confront our isolation, our aloneness, and that’s inescapable.” Seventeen years later, he told *The New York Times Magazine*, “People who delight in conversation are often using that as a means to not say what is on their minds. When I became interested in theater, the work I admired was being done by working-class writers. It was often about the inarticulate. I later saw that same thing in De Niro’s early work—it was the most sublime struggle of a man trying to express himself. There was such poetry in that for me.” The inarticulate also characterizes Day-Lewis’s favorite scripts. “The best screenplays I’ve read have been the most laconic,” he told *Film Comment* in 1988. “It’s like poetry: if someone knows how to use very few words, it’s far more effective than someone who uses a great many more to say far less.”



Ambitious oil prospector Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) with his young ‘son’ H.W. (Dillon Freasier) in Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*.



Day-Lewis as Johnny (left) in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Day-Lewis as Cecil Vyse, an upper-class twit, in *James Ivory's A Room with a View* (1986) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

There Will Be Blood is certainly laconic—its first twenty minutes pass by with nearly no dialog whatsoever. When Plainview meets the Sunday family, owners of the ranch he aims to buy, he approaches them with kindness—full of “please” and “thank you”—but his sincerity is difficult to gauge, because words, for Plainview, are people-movers, not vessels of the truth. Every speech he gives is obviously prepared; every spoken response is prefaced by a silent beat of careful consideration of how Plainview can best get what he wants. “He’s got his snakebite remedy and he is going to sell that whatever way he can from town to town,” Day-Lewis explained recently on *The Charlie Rose Show*. “And for a man that has lived in silence in holes in the ground for maybe years, he’s now got to find a voice and a silver tongue that’s got to convince people to turn their pockets inside out and invest in him as a man of irrefutable wisdom.”

In some ways, Daniel Plainview emerges as a hot-blooded Western equivalent of Day-Lewis’s character in *The Age of Innocence*, the lovelorn New York lawyer Newland Archer. In the 1993 film directed by Martin Scorsese, Archer falls for his fiancée’s cousin, an alluring divorcee, but finds himself absolutely unable to act on his feelings, strictly forbidden by the delicate unwritten social rules of the 1880s upper classes. Not unlike Archer, Plainview deeply harbors an emotion that is socially unacceptable to reveal, and must spend a great deal of the film talking around it, expressing it only in the briefest of looks and glances. Where Archer’s face is all grins and nods for business’s sake, Plainview’s is the same—also for

business purposes. But where Archer knows only soft expressions and good intentions, Daniel Plainview is absolutely gruff around the edges, full of scowls and furrowed brows—what *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis calls “strange, contorted Kabuki-like grimaces.” There is very little longing in Plainview’s face—though what little there is proves very telling, as we shall see—only irritation with others for being in his way. The difference is that what drives Plainview is not, as in Archer’s case, unconsummated love. It is unconsummated contempt.

“By considering the circumstances of an individual character so deeply, the best Day-Lewis performances finally bring our attention back, full circle, to society.”

What Plainview hates more than anything else are things that are uncontrollable, namely bad fortune. The fact that people have the bad fortune of being, at bottom, uncontrollable, with free wills of their own, absolutely infuriates him. If someone is standing taller than he—economically or morally—Plainview wants to cut them down, personally. Economically, he’s irked by the powerful corporate oil companies that are itching to buy him out. Morally, he’s violently irritated by the young preacher Eli Sunday (Paul Dano) in whose township, Little Boston, Plainview constructs his latest oil enterprise. The more misfortunes that befall Plainview, the more impatient and resentful he becomes.

Yet when it comes to explaining himself and his own motivations, Plainview’s silver tongue fails him. When he’s at his most candid,

Plainview can only explain he hates “people”—but that’s obvious enough from how he acts. “I don’t like to explain myself,” Plainview complains, and he routinely attempts to compensate for his inarticulateness with bold acts. Those who can’t speak, in Plainview’s case, *do*. But acting in a world of people demands communication, or else bold acts become blunt and brutal. And *There Will Be Blood* is, in the end—about the time Plainview starts drooling—very brutal indeed.

Of Day-Lewis’s previous films, *There Will Be Blood* has drawn the most comparisons to his other film with Martin Scorsese, *Gangs of New York*, largely due to the films’ shared brutality. Whether it is throwing axes in peoples’ backs or hanging common folk at the gallows for political purposes, Day-Lewis’s Bill “The

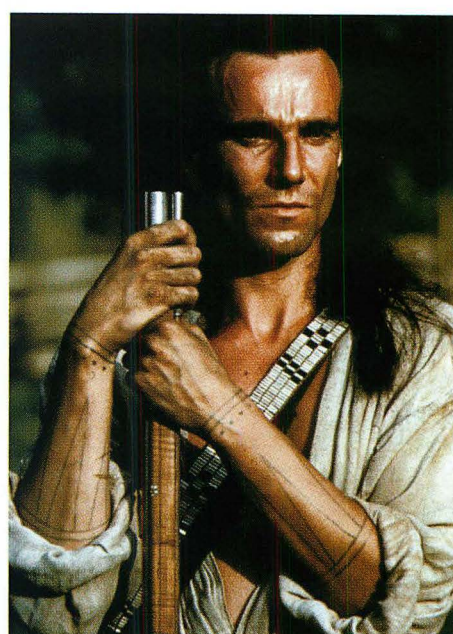
Butcher” Cutting stops at nothing to maintain his power. But Cutting isn’t an all-out villain; he is not without his motivations. In one scene, suffering from a bout of introspective insomnia, the Butcher awakens his up-and-coming apprentice Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), proceeding to explicate on his life’s ruling philosophy. Like Daniel Plainview, Cutting is wholly articulate in public, spitting Bible-styled phrases with acumen—but like Plainview, in private, at his most vulnerable, Cutting proves pithy. With a deep sigh, pause, and a terse four word seeming non-sequitur—“I never had a son”—Day-Lewis turns the murderer into a man we can understand, conveying why Cutting trusts the young Amsterdam so much, someone Cutting knows very little about—and who, it turns out, is planning to kill him.



Day-Lewis in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Day-Lewis as Christy Brown in *My Left Foot* (1989) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Day-Lewis as Hawkeye in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Daniel Plainview never has such a single, self-contained expository moment—though one scene around a campfire comes close. His moments of introspection are few and far between. Still, Day-Lewis seizes on each one as an opportunity to drag Plainview's persona out of dark villainy into grey ambiguity. Like *Gangs of New York*, these moments of vulnerability in *There Will Be Blood* are bound up with fatherhood, continuing a recent trend in the actor's work. Once, Day-Lewis was often, first and foremost, a son. In films like *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *My Left Foot*, *In The Name of the Father*, and even *The Last of the Mohicans*, his relationship (or lack of relationship) to his parents was a key aspect of the character, even if sometimes too simplistically.⁴ Older as he is now, *There Will Be Blood* is the fifth film in a row in which Day-Lewis plays a father or aspiring father figure. In *The Crucible*, he labors to fix the strife of a troubled marriage in the company of his two sons, while *The Boxer* sees him training his old girlfriend's fatherless son at boxing. In *Gangs of New York* he tutored the fatherless Leonardo DiCaprio in gangs; and in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, Day-Lewis overfathered his daughter to unhealthy extremes.

Fatherhood appears to be Plainview's one project involving a relationship not strictly stipulated by contracts. Plainview later gives us reason to doubt his sincerity as a father, but early on he laughs, smiles, and communicates with H.W. too often to make the gestures disingenuous. He often proudly introduces himself and his adopted son, H.W. Plainview, as a "family business," and brings along H.W. with him wherever he goes, explaining each business move in detail. When an explosive oil fire leaves H.W. deaf, Plainview is faced with a choice between family or fortune: raising H.W. or

raising "ocean's of oil" out from under the ground. Whenever Plainview suffers disappointment, Day-Lewis communicates the feeling with a series of subtle sighs; every dealing with the young H.W. after this point is one long, sincere sigh. When Plainview discusses the prospect of sending his son away with his assistant, he does so in soft tones—soft out of sadness, not discreetness—speaking his words as he exhales. When H.W. is eventually sent away, we know Plainview is making the inhumane decision, but Day-Lewis shows there's just enough humanity left in Plainview that it's a decision laced with grief.

Soon it becomes clear H.W. was Plainview's one anchor to humanity; when H.W. leaves Plainview, Plainview's restraint leaves with him. In one scene set in a restaurant, Plainview pathetically tries to put one over on a table of oil executives, boasting of his business dealings. Day-Lewis endows Plainview with such desperation it is almost as emotionally raw as the actor's famous restaurant scene in *My Left Foot*, in which an anguished Christy Brown learns of his beloved tutor's engagement to another man. Only this time around, the character is not struggling for the power to express himself; Plainview is attempting to exert power over others. As the film continues, Plainview's power plays fare better, but we keep cringing. So unlike, say, *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, which was also very much about the damaging ambitions of fathers, the father in *There Will Be Blood* is never, ever redeemed. Our immediate response is to cringe in embarrassment, not cry in sympathy.

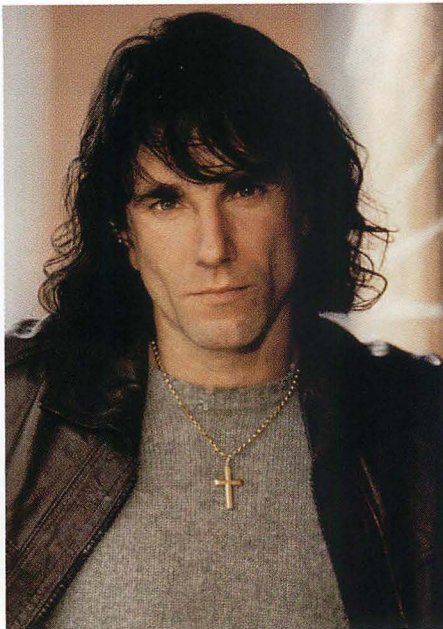
The performance still impresses, rather than repulses, possibly because Day-Lewis shows Plainview more sympathy than we in the audience could ever possibly muster. "You have to like your character, regardless

of whether you think he'll be liked by the audience," Day-Lewis told *American Film* in 1988. "It's very important to say that, regardless of how obnoxious any character you're playing might be, you have to feel sympathy or compassion or an enormous degree of empathy for that character." At one point, a man arrives in *There Will Be Blood* claiming to be Plainview's half brother. Their meeting results in opportunities for Plainview to reminisce, even to explain himself, however briefly. The smile on Day-Lewis's face in these moments creates a window into a huge, off-screen void where Plainview's past resides, question marks asking why Plainview is who he is, perhaps even how he could have been different. "The thing about performance, even if it's only an illusion," the actor once told *Rolling Stone*, "is that it is a celebration of the fact that we do contain within ourselves infinite possibilities. It's an admission of the fact that we contain within us other lives, that we don't have to live by rigid beliefs that one thing is right and one thing is wrong." Day-Lewis's performance shows us all sides of Daniel Plainview, all these possibilities.

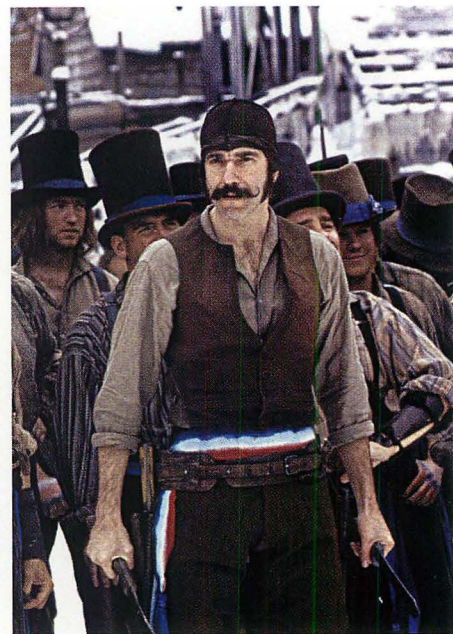
By considering the circumstances of an individual character so deeply, the best Day-Lewis performances finally bring our attention back, full circle, to society. It is probably not a coincidence, then, that so many of Day-Lewis's films are set in the past within very particular times and places. For this reason, high-school teacher Jim Cullen has written of how he uses three of Day-Lewis's films set in America—*The Crucible*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Gangs of New York*—as teaching tools in the classroom due to their "remarkably textured, yet consistent, vision of American history." But Cullen also raises possible problems with Day-Lewis's American roles when he interprets what that



Day-Lewis as Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence* (1993) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Day-Lewis as Gerry Conlon in *In the Name of the Father* (1994) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Day-Lewis as Bill 'The Butcher' in *Gangs of New York* (2002) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

vision entails. "The engine of American history, Daniel Day-Lewis tells us, is a restless individualist who strains against an inherited culture, an individual as likely to look back as to look forward, but an individual who, in that very restlessness, also paves the way for a new generation, one that will ultimately produce a new rebellion for a new age." Continues Cullen, "It's a little surprising to realize that in some respects the argument that Day-Lewis is making is not that much unlike the one John Wayne did in his body of work—or by broadening the frame of reference a bit to bring Alan Ladd into the picture, one might dub it the *Shane* school of history, where misfits with good hearts redeem and renew a country."⁵

But this observation is only possible if one overlooks the change Day-Lewis's individuals undergo throughout their stories. Normally by the time the credits roll, his characters have achieved a certain degree of personal transcendence, not only leaving their stamp on society, but also changing themselves, reconciling with the world around them. In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the ex-skinhead Johnny puts trust in his Pakistani lover; they close out the film making love. In *A Room with a View*, the appropriately-named Cecil Vyse summons the courage to break his chaste engagement to a woman who has found a lover of her own. The adulterous Tomas finally retires to the countryside with his wife in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; while Gerry Conlon

marches out of the courthouse at the end of *In the Name of the Father*, triumphant and vindicated after a long legal struggle. In *The Crucible*, the character John Proctor famously sacrifices his life rather than admit the validity of the Salem witch hunt. Another American history film, *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*—which Cullen fails to mention—features what may be one of Day-Lewis's most affecting scenes, when the aging hippy Jack Slavin breaks down at the kitchen table of his capitalist nemesis, realizing the painful patriarchal mistakes he's made raising his daughter Rose, despite his communitarian ideals.

Over the course of these films, Day-Lewis's characters have grown from irresponsible boys-in-men's clothing into new selves with a sense of accountability to oth-

ers. According to Rebecca Miller, who directed Day-Lewis in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, the actor consciously builds towards these moments. "Something I noticed especially when I came to cut the film is that... the choices that he makes within a film are inevitably pushing the whole thing forward," Miller told Charlie Rose in 2005. "He's storytelling... Although he's very much in his own world and completely inside of that and concentrated, he's also very aware of propelling the story forward, making choices that move you along." *Time* magazine critic Richard Schickel notes a similar quality in the actor's performance in *There Will Be Blood*. "It is the genius (and I use that word advisedly) of Daniel Day-Lewis's performance to slowly, patiently, show the madness replacing his former rationalism, to prepare us for the film's astonishing ending."

At the end of *There Will Be Blood*, Plainview's barking and drooling takes the place of what would normally be, for a Day-Lewis character, a moment of reconciliation. The ending has divided the film's viewers. Some see it as unnecessarily breaking the sparse pace the film sets prior to the scene; others, like Manohla Dargis, find it characteristic of Day-Lewis's performance as a whole, "brilliantly located at the juncture between cinematic realism and theatrical spectacle." But few if any deny the power Daniel Day-Lewis gives to the scene, the character of Daniel Plainview, and to *There Will Be Blood* as a whole. It is a rare performance—not



Day-Lewis as aging hippy Jack Slavin with his daughter Rose (Camilla Belle) in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose* (2005) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis, center) watches as newly discovered oil gushes from the earth in *There Will Be Blood*.

only in terms of quality, but for Day-Lewis himself. *There Will Be Blood* is only the fifteenth film Day-Lewis has completed in more than twenty years. This selective choice of roles is one reason they stay so good; he saves himself for the very best, and invests each role with careful consideration. But his selectivity not only indicates his skill, it also reveals recurring themes across his career, something approaching a definite, if complex, point of view. As long as Day-Lewis's performances escape cliché, so too ought the critical considerations of his work. ■

End Notes:

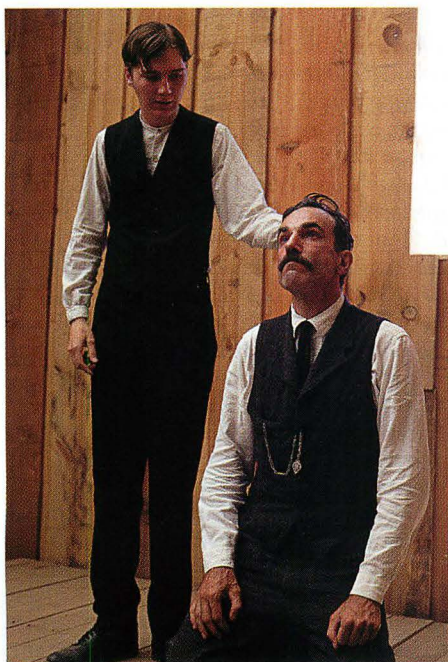
¹ One gossipy biography published on Day-Lewis combines these clichés, attempting to explain Day-Lewis's "intensity" as an actor as the result of his famous father—the poet Cecil Day-Lewis—dying while Day-Lewis was still a boy; see Garry Jenkins, *Daniel Day-Lewis: The Fire Within* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

² For instance, media frequently recall his training as a shoe cobbler's apprentice in Italy, but forever fail to mention his reporting on the violence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine for the organization Médecins Sans Frontières. See Daniel Day-Lewis, "Inside Scarred Minds," *The Sunday Times*, 20 March 2005.

³ It should be noted these media scripts have also benefited Day-Lewis, at least in that they have given him a great deal of success and a choice over roles to play. For an important discussion of how Day-Lewis met success where his South Asian costars in *My Beautiful Laundrette* did not, due in large part to racism in the industry, see Christine Geraghty, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

⁴ For a discussion of the problematic gender roles in *My Left Foot*, see Ruth Barton, *Jim Sheridan: Framing the Nation* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002).

⁵ Jim Cullen, "National Character: Daniel Day-Lewis, American Historian," *Common-Place*, July 2007, Volume 7, Issue 4 < <http://www.common-place.org/vol-07/no-04/school/> >.



Daniel Plainview confesses his 'sins' to preacher Eli Sunday (Paul Dano) in this scene from *There Will Be Blood*.



Plainview is later congratulated and welcomed into the congregation by members of the Church of the Third Revelation in *There Will Be Blood*.

Don't Make Your Dreams Too Small:

An Interview with John Sayles

by Dan Georgakas

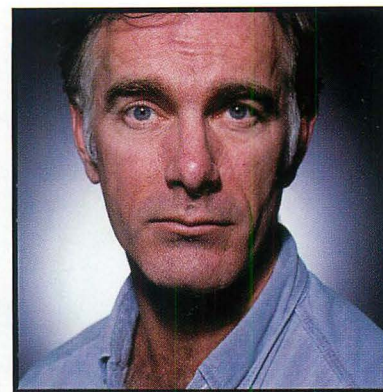


Photo by Robin Holland

John Sayles holds a unique place in American cinema. Although he has been a highly regarded writer/director of independent films for nearly thirty years, he has a niche in Hollywood as well. Mainstream producers frequently employ him as—to use Sayles's terminology—"a for-hire screenwriter." His first such work was for the legendary pop schlock master Roger Corman, but he has since worked for mainstream directors such as Ron Howard. As an actor, besides his own films, Sayles has been cast by directors that include Spike Lee and Bertrand Tavernier. He has written for television, most notably the pilot and episodes for Shannon's Deal. He's been the executive producer of three films, including *Girlfight*. To these credits can be added two plays, three novels, and scores of short stories. When the Thessaloniki International Film Festival learned that *Honeydripper*, his sixteenth independent feature, was ready for European release, they decided the time was ripe, if not long overdue, for a John Sayles Retrospective.

Accompanying Sayles to the forty-eighth Thessaloniki Film Festival (2007) was Maggie Renzi, his longtime companion and the producer of most of his films. They were joined by Danny Glover, the star of *Honeydripper* and by David

Strathairn and Chris Cooper, two actors who have worked in a number of Sayles films. Sayles was very generous with his time, giving a master class and press conferences for audiences whose largest segment consisted of film students from nearby Aristotle University. Maggie Renzi underscored what a joy it was to be in a place where film was discussed as art rather than as commerce. Cooper and Strathairn echoed that sentiment, saying it was a pleasure to talk about acting as a craft rather than being asked what it was like to work with George Clooney. At a master class by Cooper and Strathairn, some students in the audience actually gasped when Strathairn said it was not uncommon to go on a set without ever having met the director and Cooper talked about not having a complete script even after shooting began. In a different class, Sayles said one of the reasons prominent actors liked to work with him was not only the nature of his scripts, but also that he liked to cast them in roles they hadn't tried before, not as a gimmick but to allow them to show the full range of their acting abilities.

I, like other Cineaste editors, began to follow Sayles's work with the release of *Return of the Secaucus 7* (1980). Looking again at all of Sayles's films as a body of work and hearing from those responsible for making them generated a new appreciation for what he has been able to achieve. Sayles personifies what independent filmmaking should be about, not an apprenticeship period to gain entrance to Hollywood, but a different concept of filmmaking. Sayles, in fact, uses his Hollywood mainstream jobs to finance his indie projects. Seeing some of the films with Greek audiences also was valuable in understanding how the political and social messages characteristic of Sayles's films are presented in a way that their appeal is not limited to a national audience. The blues music and social dynamics in *Honeydripper* were greeted at Thessaloniki with the enthusiasm Greeks usually reserve for rebetika, their own form of blues. There also was considerable applause for vari-

ous scenes during the screening of *Matewan* (1987), and as I roamed the festival, I kept hearing fervent appreciation of films such as *City of Hope* (1991) and *Men with Guns* (1997). Sayles also struck a profound note, widely quoted in the Greek press, when he concluded his acceptance speech at the awards ceremony by urging beginning Greek filmmakers, "Don't make your dreams too small."

As I prepared my notes for our formal interview, I realized an ideal place to begin discussion of his lifework was *Honeydripper*, a film that brings together many Sayles motifs. The setting is Harmony, Alabama, 1950. Tyrone Purvis (Danny Glover) owns *Honeydripper*, a rundown music club that no longer attracts a crowd. Desperate to survive, Purvis decides to present a new sound: electric guitar. As Purvis puts together various schemes to make the event happen, we learn about the tensions between black workers in the cotton fields, religious revivalists, gangsters, musicians anxious about trying something new, soldiers about to

go to war in Korea, and romantic rivals. This black tableau is indirectly controlled by whites who are not particularly mean but routinely exploit black labor and protect white privilege. Sayles handles this explosive material adroitly,

Independent thoughts from a thirty-year veteran of the scene, from *The Return of The Secaucus 7* to *Honeydripper*.

working in a few secret histories and a ghostly guitar player some citizens of Harmony see and some do not. The social dynamics at play enhance our understanding of the individual stories rather than overwhelming them.

Honeydripper ends with a terrific musical sequence in which all the film's plot lines find expression, if not resolution. The featured song is a revised version of "Good Rocking Tonight," the tune usually credited as the first rock-and-roll song. It is played by Gary Clark, Jr., who also performs some of his own songs. The music is so good that, after a rousing performance at the Chicago Blues Festival, the film's musicians have toured as the *Honeydripper* All-Star Band. But a Sayles film is always multidimensional. *Honeydripper* may be about the need to adapt, but some of the early scenes demonstrate considerable compassion for the musical epoch that is receding.—Dan Georgakas

Cineaste: All your films take on social and political problems. Do you think such films can directly affect political change or do they simply serve to motivate people to learn more about a given subject?

John Sayles: No single film is going to affect change, but every film is part of the social conversation. What matters politically is what part they play in the conversation. Are they in the helpful part or the harmful part? I mean you are going to be part of the conversation whether you like it or not. So are you going to be a mindless part? Are you going to be a politically unconscious movie that reproduces the status quo without asking any questions? Consider the issue of race relationships in the United States. I would say that for the first fifty years of movies, they were part of the problem. Look at any movie from the 1930s. You see racism in a Marx Brothers comedy that they never thought of as racist. Even in Preston Sturges you see red caps doing funny darkie stuff. Sturges was thoughtful in other



Sonny Blake (Gary Clark, Jr.), the phenomenal electric guitar player, who turns out to be a more than adequate replacement for the advertised performer, "Guitar Sam," in John Sayles's *Honeydripper*.

ways, but he was politically unconscious regarding race. In my own work, I am not interested in being politically correct. I don't even know what that means. But I want to be politically conscious. Filmmakers need to ask what we want our movies to be. Do we make fast food that is forgotten as soon as it's consumed? Or do we make something whose taste lingers? No given film is going to change the world overnight and no film operates single-handedly, but every film is part of the social conversation.

Cineaste: *How does Honeydripper fit into that conversation?*

Sayles: A reaction I've heard from some critics is that *Honeydripper* is a "fun" version of issues I've dealt with more gravely in the past. I say look again. No one is getting lynched. *Honeydripper* is not about lynching. But for me the most important line in the movie is when the sheriff (Stacy Keach) stops the kid walking down the road and the first thing he says is, "Take off your hat." I grew up at a time when all white males felt they had a right to demand that. The kid is very apologetic because he's been trained in that same system. Now as a screenwriter for hire, I get asked to create a movie world, and that's a place that doesn't function well if you put in too much reality. Often the notes are specific. The people who hire me indicate where they do *not* want the script to go. It's like a neighborhood where you are limited about where you can walk. You must not rupture any boundaries. *Honeydripper*, like all my movies, walks through the whole neighborhood.

Cineaste: *Tell us about the Honeydripper neighborhood.*

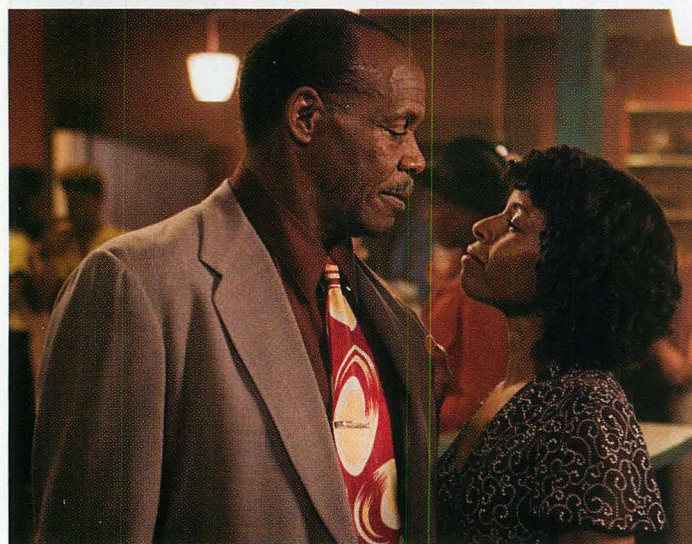
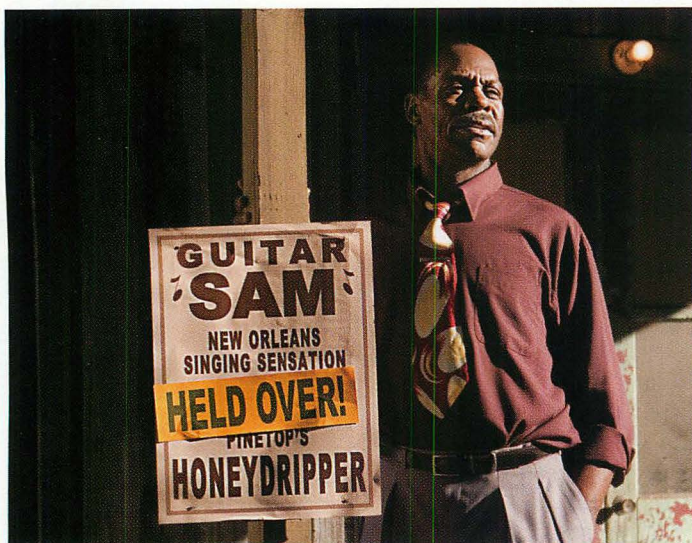
Sayles: What Saturday night meant for black people, whether spent in a revival tent or a bar, was escape from a really tough week. That week was spent picking cotton. Those big long bags weigh fifteen pounds. You got pennies for filling them with little balls of cotton. You would have to pick something like ten bags a day to have a reasonable income. The John Henrys of cotton might be able to do

that, but most people did five bags. At the end of the week, you were due about \$5 and then they started making deductions for "stones" and providing water. Well, that's part of the music. That's part of the scene. And if you are going to do a movie about the blues, there has to be violence in it because there is a dark undertone to the blues. Every old blues musician I've ever talked with talks about those clubs, about people getting cut or shot and being put out the back door. Sometimes they just come back in, and everyone hopes they won't be mad and will just sit and drink. There was always that undercurrent.

Cineaste: *Among the secondary characters in Honeydripper are black soldiers from a nearby army base. Why was it important to have such characters in a film about music?*

Sayles: When the military was desegregated in 1948, the brass told Truman that it could handle race relations on the bases, but didn't know what was going to happen in all those small southern towns where so many of the bases were located. Local whites in those towns knew blacks had been trained militarily and were being treated equally at the base, but they didn't want those changes in their towns. I just wrote something for Denzel Washington about an incident from World War II. There was a black tank battalion and the town nearby treated its members poorly. At a certain point, their white officer led that unit into town and told them that if you do this to our people again, we will level this town. I don't think you could have that music without that reality. You can't tell that story without that context. It doesn't have to be in the foreground, but it's got to be there.

My main reason for doing the film was liking the music, but I was also very interested in showing the transitions going on. This is the moment when everything is going to change. Everything is going to be different. In *Honeydripper* the story arc is happy. At the con-



Top: Danny Glover as Tyrone "Pinetop" Purvis.
Bottom: Tyrone with his wife Delilah (Lisa Gay Hamilton).

Top: Ubiquitous street musician Possum (Keb' Mo').
Bottom: Sheriff Pugh (Stacy Keach) oversees cotton-field workers.

clusion, most things get resolved in a satisfactory way for the characters. At least for the moment. But I also would like people to think about the aging ballplayers in the Negro League when Jackie Robinson opens the major leagues for black players. Or those silent-era movie directors and actors who couldn't adapt to the talkies.

Cineaste: *The white sheriff ends up helping the owner of the nightclub.*

Sayles: Well, he helps in his own corrupt way. The first question I got from Stacy Keach was, "How does this character differ from the Kris Kristofferson character in *Lone Star*?" I replied that this sheriff is not a psychopath. He doesn't like to hurt people, but he wants to be in control. In the sheriff's bio, I identified him as a former boxer. His way of controlling people is to keep them off balance. Which means that sometimes he's genial, totally friendly. He's bemused by these people. He's condescending, but he kind of likes their music. He likes watching them dance. He's intrigued by them. He likes their food. But if they cross him or if he needs to get them to do something, he gets right in their face. He plays the race card. He uses his badge. And they'd better abide. So, his help is not conscious. There's an assumption that if a black man is running a club like that, he's got a white sponsor, a secret partner. The sheriff helps them in that context. I've spent a lot of time in the South and what black people tell you is that in the South you can't get too high if you are black, but in the North you can't get too close.

Cineaste: *What gets you going on a new film? Do you think it's the right time to take on some particular theme? Or is it something else, maybe a set of characters you want to explore?*

Sayles: *Casa de los Babys* is linked to the time I worked as a hospital orderly. At night, I was usually the only man on the floor and the women would forget I was a guy and just start acting like a group of women do. I found that to be a very different dynamic than groups of males talking, like you have in *Eight Men Out*. I thought a film focusing on women interacting with one another would be interesting. What became *Passion Fish* grew from reaction to Bergman's *Passion*. I knew that in America the patient would be a woman and the nurse would be black. It would be more of a comedy because Americans are not Swedes. We don't have that gallows humor. If I had the woman living in Chicago, she could have stayed in her apartment and just dealt with delivery boys, but in Louisiana, there's no way people are going to let her be alone. One time when we were traveling in the South, we ended up staying at Lake Arthur. Maggie got up in the morning, looked around, and said, "This is the place for the one about the nurses." So the films evolve and as they evolve, themes can change. My original concept for *Sunshine State* was based on guys digging for buried treasure, but when I went back to an area in Florida that I knew, everything had changed. The diners were gone and the fast-food and box stores were everywhere. I wanted to deal with that and then I remembered American Beach where blacks had gone on their vacations. So I connected the two. *City of Hope* came out of what I had seen happening in Hoboken.

Cineaste: *A number of screenwriters have told me that they often know the ending first, even before they have the characters.*

Sayles: The only time I knew the ending first was *Limbo*. One of the

attractions of mainstream movies is that we get a vicarious life experience without risking anything. Certainly we don't risk anything emotionally. Going into the *Bourne Identity 3* we know Matt Damon will survive. Audiences, in fact, get very very angry if you pull a switch on them at the end and the hero gets killed. You just can't do that in certain movies. The theme of *Limbo* is that most people are more afraid of hell, whatever hell means to them, than they are desirous of heaven. So they fear taking risks and stay in limbo. One of Woody Allen's great lines is, "Who am I going to fool into loving me again?" I wanted to make a film where the audience has to take an emotional risk. The audience is confident that at the conclusion of the film, everything is going to turn out okay. But I don't give them that. I don't give them closure. *Limbo* ends and they still don't know what will happen.

Cineaste: That was pretty gutsy.

Sayles: But not necessarily smart economically. Oddly, this is one of my studio-financed pictures. Orion gave us nine million dollars and we spent only eight because the weather was so much better than we had thought. They wanted that money back right away. But the picture didn't do any business for them. *Lone Star* was different. When I started, I didn't know who shot the sheriff. The idea for that picture was generated when I was working a for-hire job in Texas. I had a day off and I decided to take a bus to San Antonio to see the Alamo. That day the Daughters of the Alamo had an event inside and Chicanos were demonstrating outside. The Chicanos were asking us to look at that event again. The phrase "Remember the Alamo" got to me. What do we do when our legends are destructive?

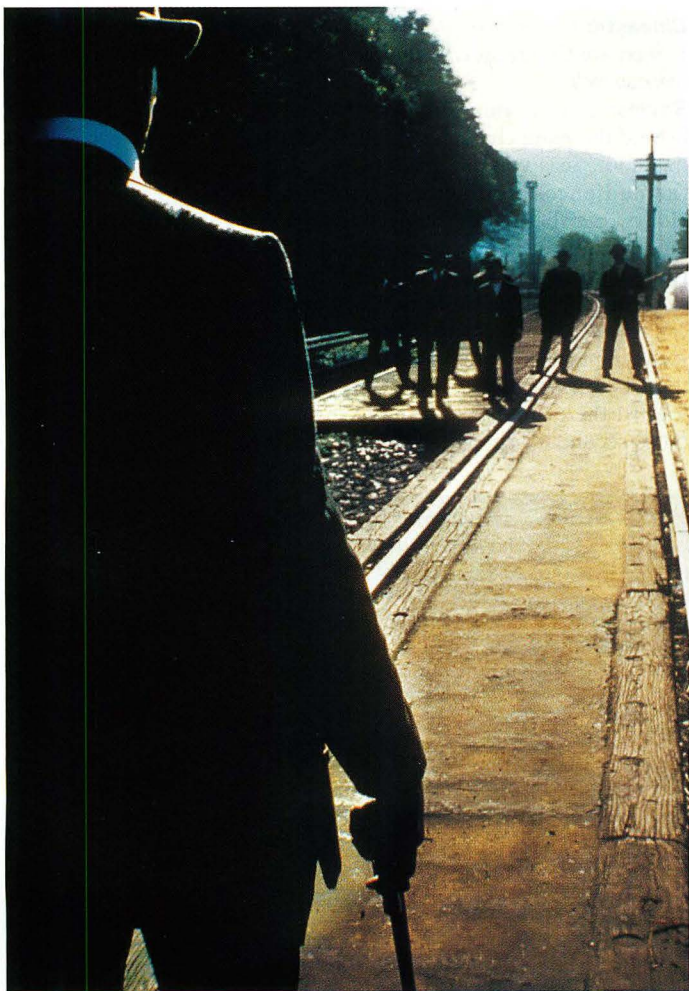
Cineaste: You write and direct your films. You edit them. You often act in them. You write lyrics for some of the songs. You have a big role

in casting. You have a personal relationship with your producer. Where does a third eye come in terms of checking authorial excess or idiosyncrasies?

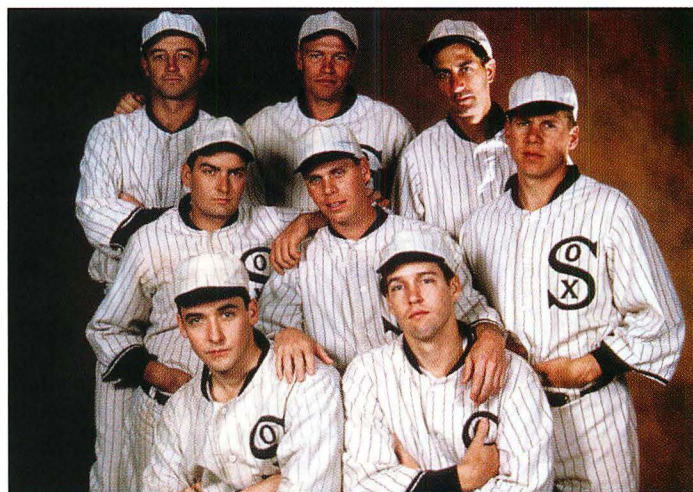
Sayles: At any one time, I have about a dozen scripts going. I'll sit down to write a page or two and realize I don't know about this. Then I either decide to do more research or I realize that I will have to let this one cook for a few more years. I bring a novelist's mentality to screenwriting. I feel that if you do not control what goes on the screen, the final editing, you're not the storyteller. Sometimes when I get stuck in the editing, I'll take a day off and see what my assistants can come up with, but I make the final decision. I want to control my films. What you are calling the third eye occurs in a different way for me. All through the process I am checking, not to see whether people like it or not, but does the film make sense to them? I cut myself out of *Lone Star* because one of my takes was a false flashback that confused people. I have worked for Ron Howard a few times and he asks everyone, just everyone, what they think. I was the last writer on *Apollo 13* and he had a read-through and then asked each actor what he thought. Each thought their character needed a few more lines. [laughs] Well, he finally did what he wanted and that works for him, but I don't need that much feedback. I usually don't change more than three lines per movie.

Cineaste: How does that occur?

Sayles: Usually it's something actors have some verbal problems with, but sometime it's more substantive. In *Passion Fish*, Angela Basset is a soap-opera star visiting Alfre Woodward, a childhood friend who is working in the house. Angela's character is from the ghetto and Alfre's from the middle class. They've switched social classes. During a chat in the kitchen, I had Alfre saying, "That's a



Sheriff Sid Hatfield (David Strathairn) faces down union-busting goons in *Matewan* (1987) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Top: Chicago White Sox players in *Eight Men Out* (1988). Bottom: *Passion Fish* (photos courtesy of Photofest).

long way up.” They asked me if I wanted the line to sound harsh, because for them it felt very harsh. I didn’t want that, so we changed the line to, “That’s a long way out.” This was just a three-way conversation. I never have read-throughs, and I don’t do too many takes. I prefer the shock of the new. Most of what you see in *Lone Star* and *The Brother From Another Planet* is a first take.

Cineaste: Your films often are about place as well as character. Being on locations must generate change.

Sayles: Oh, yes. On the maps showing the coast of Alaska there are sections marked “local knowledge.” That means don’t go there unless you have someone who knows the shoals. Whenever we go on location, we find trustworthy local people to read the script. For *Matewan* we incorporated local stories and details about the weapons actually used. For *Limbo*, I had David’s character going out on a ship that required a sizeable crew. Our reader said that if this guy has not been fishing for twenty years, he won’t find eight guys to go out with him, but there’s a fishing ship that needs only one other guy and you can always find one idiot. I didn’t know that before we got there. I also learned a lot about how to catch bass. We got some on-site Gaelic pronunciation lessons when we filmed *The Secret of Roan Inish*. A similar process happens with my Spanish language dialog. My Spanish is okay but a bit textbook. I have a Mexican friend who makes my lines more colloquial. Then I have a Chilean friend who tells me only a Mexican would say this or that, which is reassuring when we are shooting in Mexico. In *Brother* I had a Puerto Rican character. I told the actor to work with the Spanish to make it more Nuyorican.

Cineaste: Do you give actors much leeway on costumes? I’m thinking of how Rod Steiger just showed up in that camel-hair coat for *On the Waterfront*.

Sayles: I provide the one-to-five page bios I write for the actors to the costumer, cinematographer, and production designer. What I say to my costumer is this: Here’s the script. Here are the bios. Here is the situation. Here’s the sociology in play. Now you bring me three choices. I may eliminate some, but unless the production designer or cinematographer have a problem, we’ll let the actor decide between the three.

Cineaste: I understand you have a special relationship with Mason Daring, who does the music on all your films.

Sayles: I met Mason when he was a lawyer for the crew on my first movie. When my car broke down, he drove me back from a meeting and told me he also repaired cars. As he was fixing my radiator hose,

he asked what I was doing for music. I told him with a \$40,000 budget, I couldn’t afford to buy much. He informed me that he was a folk singer, gave me his album and said it might be useful for me to know that every folk singer in Boston owed him a favor because he’d done legal work for them. He could get recording time cheaply and knew who all the players were. I think after just one more film he was able to leave the law. He’d made a lot of money, but he didn’t like the work. Mason’s got an ego, of course, but not the kind that says: I’ve written a beautiful piece, why aren’t you using it? Sometimes I’ve taken his music out at the very last minute or moved it around. I didn’t think I wanted his opening sequence for *Matewan* but eventually I preferred it to the song I had bought. We can go back and forth like that. He’s among the first to get a new script. For *Honeydripper*, we prerecorded the drums and other percussion instruments, but everything else is live. I wanted my rock-and-roll guys to remember they were doing the first electric guitar anyone there had ever heard. I wanted them to start solos without being sure where they were going to end. The system Mason and I worked

out allowed us to take part of a song on any take and attach it anywhere we wanted. The solo where Gary goes outdoors comes from three separate takes. For *Limbo*, where Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio sings, I did something

different. After each take, I would go up to her and tell her next time to sing it as if you are a little more worried about your daughter. However that affected her voice was fine with me. That gave me more choices when it came to editing.

Cineaste: I’ve been impressed by how effective your crowd scenes are. Is there something specific that you do as a director that makes them work so well?

Sayles: You can mix sound so that the background sound is right behind the main characters. Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese do that a lot. So if you are in a crowded club, the characters, as well as the audience, are having a hard time hearing each other. In Hollywood that doesn’t happen. I remember a *Batman* film where Jack Nicholson is talking to someone on New Year’s Eve. People right next to them are supposedly screaming. But during the shooting they were miming. The sound, which was tuned down, came later. So we clearly hear the stars talking even though they speak in normal tones. Another thing that happens if you mix sound the way Altman did is that the secondary characters start coming toward the primary characters. That interests me because I want those secondary characters to be three dimensional. According to

“No given film is going to change the world overnight and no film operates single-handedly, but every film is part of the social conversation.”



Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) and his lover Pilar (Elizabeth Peña) in *Lone Star* (1996) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Donna (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) and Joe are stranded in the Alaskan wilderness in *Limbo* (1999) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

the Directors Guild, the director is not supposed to talk to the extras. I've been on sets as an actor where extras ask me what the scene's about.

When I direct, I tell extras why they are there and what they are supposed to be doing. I may tell someone I want you to be telling your companion a joke. That gives those actors something to work with. They are really interacting and not just looking at each other and mumbling. You have the problem of people walking in the background. That can look aimless and become distracting. I may take a first-time extra aside and say imagine you are walking toward a clothesline that is offstage. It has blue clothespins and red clothespins. You are only going to pull the red ones. Now the actor is actually looking and concentrating. So, are you interested in the people in the background or not? Are they really part of the story? Then you better give them something to do. If you are not interested in them, it's just stars and meaningless extras and that's how it plays. I think that reflects how you see the world.

Cineaste: Your films are obviously part of the conversation in America. Have they been part of the international conversation?

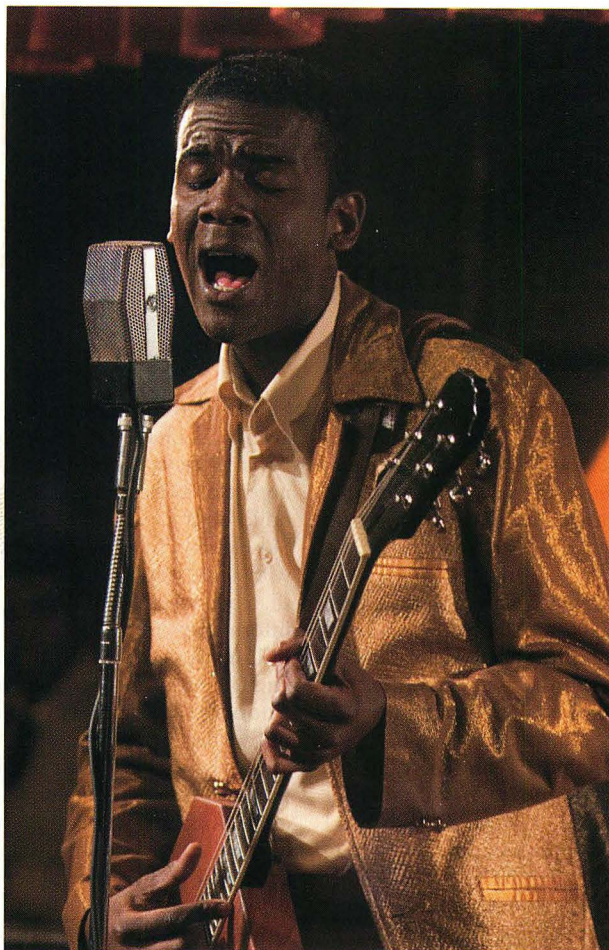
Sayles: My international situation is similar to that in the States. Critically, the films have been well received, but they have not been blockbusters, even by art-house standards. *Lone Star* did some good business in France and *Passion Fish* did very well in Scandinavia. *Brother from Another Planet* and *The Secret of Roan Inish* did very well in Japan. But it's been spotty. We've never done well enough to have automatic television sales or huge releases. *Lianna* did very well in Germany, but the next two movies did not get distribution. *Eight Men Out* did not get distributed in Japan where they play baseball.

Cineaste: That makes this retrospective in Thessaloniki quite special.

Sayles: Yes, it's the only time that all my films have been shown at a single festival. We had a wonderful retrospective at San Sebastián some years ago, but they weren't able to get all the films. I want to compliment the Thessaloniki organizers for getting prints of everything. That took extraordinary effort. The distributors of our first eight movies don't exist anymore. So you need to find the person who is the latest in a long chain of people who bought rights from someone who bought rights and all that. We're trying to get back the rights to *Matewan*. The guy who has them got them as part of a settlement from the originating company that owed him money when it went bankrupt.

Cineaste: The retrospective here is obviously going to give your work increased international visibility. More generally, how important are festivals, large and small, to filmmakers like yourself?

Sayles: The huge problem for independents is distribution. For *Honeydripper*, we decided to use the million dollars in the advance for DVD sales to self-distribute. Well, you can't buy TV time or the side of a bus with that kind of money, so we have decided to get *Honeydripper* into as many local festivals as possible. The festival theater is usually the same cinema that normally books a film like ours. So if we get a good festival reception, we can sometimes persuade that theater to run us for a week. I don't think many people realize the incredible number of films that the



Gary Clark, Jr. makes his electrifying film debut as guitarist Sonny Blake in *Honeydripper*.

democratization of filmmaking has generated. Just five years ago, there were enough watchable films that a theater could show a different film every week. Today, it could show a different film every night. That makes it increasingly difficult for any one film to find its audience. You'd be amazed at how many films with well-known actors never get a theatrical release these days. That used to be a guarantee. Sundance now gets six thousand entries annually.

Cineaste: What you are saying is that despite all the happy talk about independent filmmaking, distribution has actually gotten harder rather than easier from when you made *Return of the Secaucus 7*.

Sayles: Absolutely. When we did *Secaucus*, there were four or five distributors of non-Hollywood films. The heads of those companies would look at anything with sprocket holes. We were competing with maybe twelve other American films. The distributor usually released six films a year, so you had a one in six chance of getting on their list. Now the heads of those companies don't look at anything that isn't from a famous director until two to six people on their staff have seen it first. Then they see it on DVD while they're taking phone calls. I figure any given film has about ten minutes to make an

impression. Nowadays, you can rarely get distributors into a theater with an audience, which is how we sold *Brother from Another Planet* at Cannes and *City of Hope* at Toronto. Distributors can now get their eight decent movies without putting out any money in advance. If a particular film doesn't do well on the opening weekend, they throw in the next one. Occasionally you get indie hits via this route. Usually it's a comedy or a film that has some shock value or a gimmick. The story is told backwards or a transvestite murders her son. It might not be a good film, but it can be distinguished in its advertising. I don't think that independent films can survive that way. They need to have word of mouth. They need to reach a critical mass in a city where enough people have seen it for the audience to recreate itself. Then, you only need a newspaper ad to let people know it's still playing.

Cineaste: One of the most startling things you said in your press conference involves financing. Despite your reputation, you still can't easily raise the five to ten million you would like for a feature film. That's a modest sum by industry standards, especially since you are able to get some of our most talented actors to work at scale.

Sayles: I'd say two and a half is the highest we can go with the industry. Unless they see blockbuster potential, they don't want to invest. None of my sixteen films has been a blockbuster, so what are the odds for number seventeen? Our problem is not that different from the studio filmmakers. If you have a run of movies that make only a little money, or break even, or lose a bit, you're going to have a hard time getting financing, and the older you are and the more films you have made that were not blockbusters, the harder it gets. But maybe that's good. ■

Honeydripper is distributed by Emerging Pictures, 245 West 55th Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10019, phone (212) 245-6767, www.emergingpictures.com.

Working with John Sayles:

An Interview with David Strathairn and Chris Cooper

by Dan Georgakas

Chris Cooper (2003 Oscar winner as John Laroche in *Adaptation*), and David Strathairn (2005 Oscar nominee as Edward R. Murrow in *Good Night, and Good Luck*) made their film debuts with John Sayles. Cooper has appeared in four Sayles films and Strathairn in seven. Our conversation focused on how working with Sayles differs from working with other directors.—Dan Georgakas

Cineaste: Would you tell us how you began working with John Sayles?

David Strathairn: We met at Williams College. Two years separated us but we worked together in experimental theater. Five years later, we hooked up again at a summer theater in New Hampshire. We were both acting, and he was doing some directing. Then he decided to make *Secaucus* and my film career was launched.

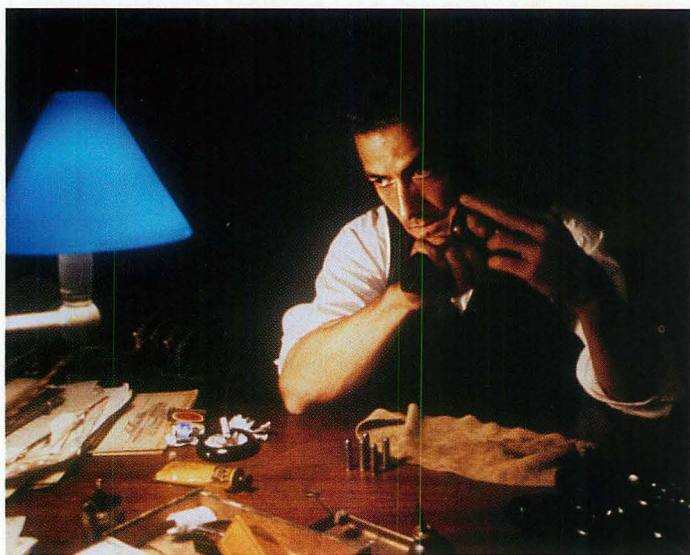
Chris Cooper: I was working in London doing a Tennessee Williams play with Harold Pinter directing. I knew John had lost funding for *Matewan* and had done *Brother from Another Planet*. My wife and I had struck a friendship with Nora Chavooshian when she was making student films at NYU. Nora was the production designer for *Brother* and she suggested me to John for the role of Joe Kenehan. When I got a call for a reading, I flew back to the States on “dark night” (Monday) and auditioned and then flew right back for the Tuesday performance without ever sleeping. I damn near fainted on stage that night, but several weeks later, John offered me the role. For a first film, you couldn’t ask for more. Here’s John, everything I ever looked for in a film director, and those other talented actors—David, Mary McDonnell, Kennie Jenkins, and of course James Earl Jones. That’s a pretty impressive way to begin a film career.

Cineaste: Tell us how you use the character bios John writes and other things that distinguish his way of making a movie.

Strathairn: The bio is a prose piece about what this character is about. They are not just stats and cold data. The bios give you a

blueprint. John’s done a lot of your homework. Not all of it. But he’s given you a leg up in doing your character work. For *Matewan*, I felt I had to know more about the Hatfields and the McCoys. What was important to those people? John offers you copious research and then you build on it. You don’t bring out all the details that you know about Sid Hatfield but you possess them. You also get to discuss costumes with John’s designers. You butt heads, of course, but, after a while, that becomes collaborative. In a period piece, actors get a lot of information from the costume. For *Eight Men Out* wearing those old uniforms, getting into those period shoes, and working with the vintage mitts and bats, informed the physicality of my character.

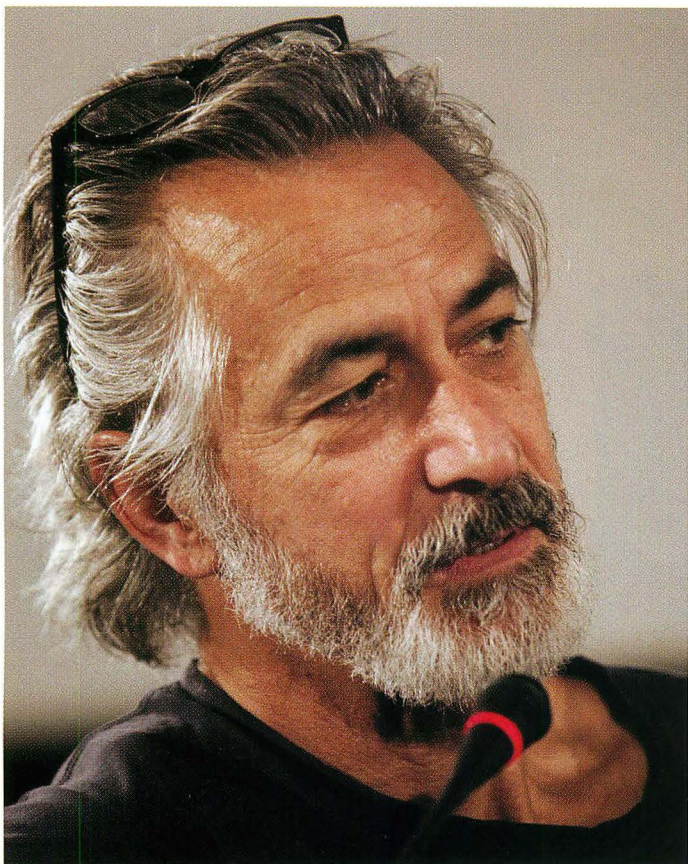
Cooper: The summary is in broad strokes. You are going to fill that out with your own sensibility and research. Working with John you always have a script that is not going to change. One thing I’ve learned in this business is that if a character isn’t realized in the script, I should question taking the role. I think our years in theater have given us a good eye for that. We know how to read a script; and you rehearse theater productions by acts and scenes. That makes you more malleable for working in film where you are not going to be shooting in sequence. Going into *Matewan*, aside from my theater experience I had nothing, but I could get a sense of the highs and lows of my character by reading John’s script. The *Bourne* film I worked on many years later was totally different. I went to Prague without a script! They kept changing things every day. We would work fourteen hours and then I’d hang around for two more hoping to get some idea of what we were going to shoot the next day. I think it’s a bit crazy to work like that: to think that just out of sheer survival instinct you are going to find the right gear to work in, get your workers together to jam, and give the impression you know what you are doing even though you are going to start shooting forty-five minutes after seeing the pages for the first time. I’m just astounded the way that film succeeded.



David Strathairn as Sheriff Sid Hatfield, who puts his life at risk against union-busting thugs in *Matewan* (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Chris Cooper as union organizer Joe Kenehan with Elma Radnor (Mary McDonnell) in *Matewan* (photo courtesy of Photofest).



David Strathairn at the Thessaloniki Festival's Master Class on Acting.



Chris Cooper at the Thessaloniki Festival's Master Class on Acting.

Strathairn: I've never heard it put that way before, but what Chris says about preparing a theater scene and a movie scene is accurate. For me, it's got to be on the page. If it's not there, they will usually tell you that, sure, we're going to do this or that. But when it comes to the shoot, if it's not been on the page, it usually doesn't happen. When you look at a script and you see that there are six people after the "written by" credit and none of them are present on the set, you know that anything can happen to the script. With John, you have a map that isn't going to change. It's honed. It's set in stone. You can go to work on your character.

Cineaste: Do you ever suggest to John that some line might be more effective if changed?

Strathairn: You don't say that to John.

Cooper: John can justify every line. He can give you the reasons why he has written it exactly as you see it.

Cineaste: Sayles says getting on site always changes or informs the script. How does the site affect your performance?

Cooper: *Matewan* was a touchy proposition. The West Virginians had been put in a poor light by previous productions. So we really had to win their trust. I knew something about the situation before doing the film, but not the particulars about child labor, wages, and the working conditions. I must tell you that it's a wonderful experience when you are working with out-of-work coal miners as extras and on your Sunday day off, you go to this tiny church and you walk in and there are only women there, and this three-hundred-pound minister who has a speaking role in your film, and his first words are for the men who are absent because this is the first day of legal squirrel hunting and they are out there, not for sport, but food. You want to do those people justice.

Strathairn: Every time you work with John you go to where the story is being told—a bayou, coal country, baseball fields, or the streets of Harlem. It's not artificial. You are in a real place. People from the community are working on the film. In *Matewan*, you hear the coal train coming through the set every day. You smell the coal. You hear the accents. In Alaska, you learn to be very careful. If you got lost half a mile out of town, you could die. *Eight Men Out* is about as close as John has come to doing a big studio production

and the shooting for that started out much different than with his previous films. When we got to the set on the first day, I was astounded by all the fancy equipment and by the mammoth mounds of food and silverware that Hollywood thinks is needed to keep actors and crew happy. I thought it was excessive. The set didn't have that comfortable level we had had for *Matewan* and *Brother from Another Planet*. I sensed John felt the same way. He, too, felt displaced. We also had a lot of "suits" standing around. Within a couple of days, all that changed. John got rid of all that excessive stuff.

Cineaste: Is there some downside to having the cast so intimate with one another? Kazan, for one, liked to foster tensions between his actors. Might a creative edge be lost if cast members are too cozy with one another?

Strathairn: No, I don't think so. Every experience with John has an intimate feel that works for the film. There are those people you worked with before, but there are new people and those you hope to work with again. The uncertainty of a new experience is lessened and you can get on with the work. I think earlier on, the ensemble feeling was even stronger. You can say we were very East Coast and theater-oriented. But those experiences made things much easier for me. We were literally cutting our cinematic teeth. Working with John taught me what it means to be in film.

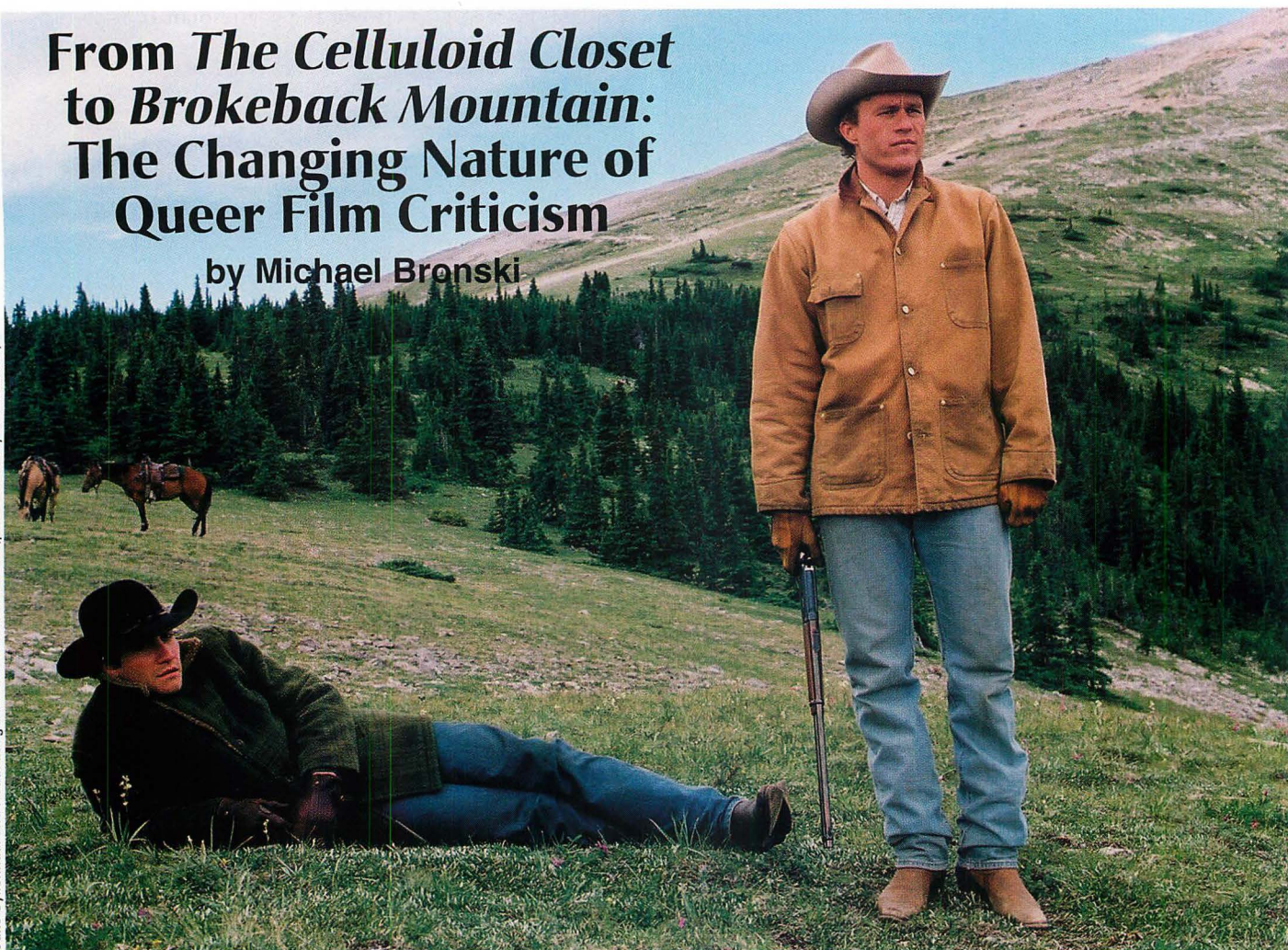
Cooper: What John does is set the standard... no, that's not the right word, maybe tone is better. If someone new comes into the company and acts a little high horse, the cast, as a unit, will let that person know you don't have to prove anything here. John has cast you. You don't have to impress him. You don't have to impress us. We're here to do this great film. Let's do it. You get that sense.

Every time I work with John I am aware that time is money. On *Matewan* I knew a lot of the costs were coming out of John's pocket. And I realized the enormous responsibility a director bore just to get us through one day of shooting. Well, John says David and I are easy dates. What that means is that I came to the *Matewan* set as prepared as possible. I came open for different interpretations or takes. I came wanting to make it as easy for him as possible. That's something I've carried into every other film I've ever worked on. That was a great way to start in the movies. ■

From *The Celluloid Closet* to *Brokeback Mountain*: The Changing Nature of Queer Film Criticism

by Michael Bronski

Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger in *Brokeback Mountain* (photo courtesy of Photofest)



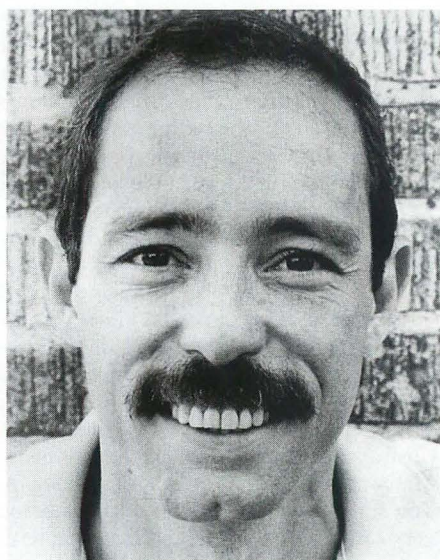
It has been just over two years since the release of Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* and the intense media coverage that ensued: endless *Brokeback* jokes on the late-night talk shows, a *New Yorker* cover parody featuring George Bush and Dick Cheney, numerous mock "trailers" on YouTube, and a full-fledged angry protest in the LGBT press that industry homophobia had prevented the film from winning a Best Picture Oscar (even though Lee won Best Director and the film garnered three wins out of eight nominations). While the immediate excitement over *Brokeback Mountain* has died down—and the film itself has entered that vague category of "classic" that is usually reserved for movies that people remember fondly although not necessarily want to view again—it is clear, two years later, that this *Brokeback* moment was a major cultural event.

That "event," however we might interpret it, underscores the fact that the very idea of LGBT film or "queer cinema" (its more academically appropriate monicker) has changed radically in the recent past. The three books reviewed here—one of them dedicated only to exegesis of *Brokeback Mountain*—are emblematic of these changes and can only be understood in the broader context of the enormous cultural shifts that have occurred in the three decades.

I am now in the middle of teaching a course on queer film at Dartmouth College—*Queers, Queens, and Questionable Women: How Hollywood Shaped Post-War GLBT Politics and Vice Versa*—and was amazed when I began putting together the syllabus at not only how brief, and fast moving, the history

of specifically queer criticism has been, but also how protean it has been. Looking at contemporary queer film criticism it is important to remember that—with the exception of some early books and essays by the brilliant, and now largely forgotten by younger queer writers and academics, Parker Tyler—as a discipline it doesn't really begin until the early 1970s, several years after the Stonewall Riots and the birth of the Gay Liberation movement. While there had always been gay men and lesbians writing about film (employing coded references in the mainstream press, and more openly in the homophile publications of the 1950s and 1960s) the post-Stonewall grass-roots gay and feminist press spawned a wealth of new critics and criticism that wedded esthetic concerns with political analysis. Writers such as Richard Dyer, whose groundbreaking anthology *Gays and Film* was released in 1977 and B. Ruby Rich, whose essays appeared in *The Chicago Reader* and *The Village Voice* during the 1970s and 1980s, spearheaded a revolution in film analysis that continues to have a profound effect on academic film studies.

Yet, it's curious that as influential as thinkers such as Dyer and Rich have been in the popular imagination (and often on the academic syllabus), it is Vito Russo's 1981 film survey cum polemic, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, which has



Vito Russo (1946-1990), author of *The Celluloid Closet* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

had the most impact. Reissued in a revised edition in 1987, three years before Russo's death, the impact of the book was enhanced by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's 1995 documentary film based upon it. Like Dyer and Rich, Russo began writing in the LGBT press in the 1970s and while it was clear that he loved movies, *The Celluloid Closet* was more concerned with politics than the nuances of interpretation or analysis. While Russo's analysis was, in many ways, groundbreaking for its time—and still yields some potent insights in his lively, chatty prose—much of it now feels outdated, superseded by ideas generated by both feminist and queer theory.

Russo argued that lesbians and gay men had been continually marginalized and demonized in Hollywood films and that these "negative images" were both a result—and continued to promote—deep-seated social homophobia. (He also documented how gay characters, stigmatized as "bad" and immoral, were often killed by the end of a film's narrative. To reinforce this point, in an appendix to the book he supplies a "necrology" of queer characters who die.) But the problem with Russo's dichotomized negative/positive image analysis was that it simply didn't leave much middle ground for ambiguity, or in some cases, even interpretation. It is telling that some of the films that Russo singles out for not promoting positive images, such as *The Children's Hour* (1962), *The Killing of Sister George* (1967), and *The Boys in the Band* (1970), have become staples of LGBT film festivals and college courses.

But while Russo consistently advocates a social critique of LGBT themed films along the lines of positive/negative images, he frequently understands the limitations of this approach. Noting that a variety of homosexual characters are represented in *The Boys in the Band*, he writes that "the film was not positive, but it was fair."

Michael Bronski examines three new books that challenge the orthodoxy of how both contemporary viewers and critics should "read" a queer film.

While contemporary readers might disagree with many of Russo's critical precepts or conclusions, the continuing power of

between the gay/lesbian film culture of 1970s and 1980s and the "queer culture" of today. The first is that we've witnessed an enormous proliferation of homosexual images in film and television during the last quarter century—more than Russo and other writers of the 1980s could have imagined. For example, consider the 2007 holiday catalog

for TLA, a film distributor that specializes in queer material and features advertisements for hundreds of fairly recent, nonerotic, queer male films (there are also many more erotic titles). Some of these, such as Adam Shank-

man's 2007 *Hairspray*, are high-quality Hollywood product, while others, such as Zak Tucker's *Poster Boy*, are interesting independent productions. Queer audiences today have their choice not only of a wide range of titles, but also eagerly participate in an industry that is aimed specifically at them.

The second change is that the cultural and political definitions of both "positive" and "negative" have drastically shifted. Whereas Russo could label the "sissies" (such as Edward Everett Horton and Franklin Pangborn) in 1930s films as homophobic, a character such as Jack on *Will and Grace*, while not a role model, is now seen by queer audiences as a perfectly acceptable representation of a gay man. I think that no one would ever write—as Russo does in the first sentences of *The Celluloid Closet*: "Nobody likes a sissy. That includes dykes, faggots, and feminists of both sexes. Even in a time of sexual revolution, when traditional roles are being examined and challenged every day, there is something about a man who acts

Books Reviewed in This Article

The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers

Edited by Matthew Hays. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007. 383 pp., illus. Paperback: \$22.95.

The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows

Edited by James Morrison. London: Wallflower Press, 2007. 181 pp., illus. Paperback: \$25.00.

Reading Brokeback Mountain

Edited by Jim Stacy. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2007. 237 pp. Paperback: \$35.00.

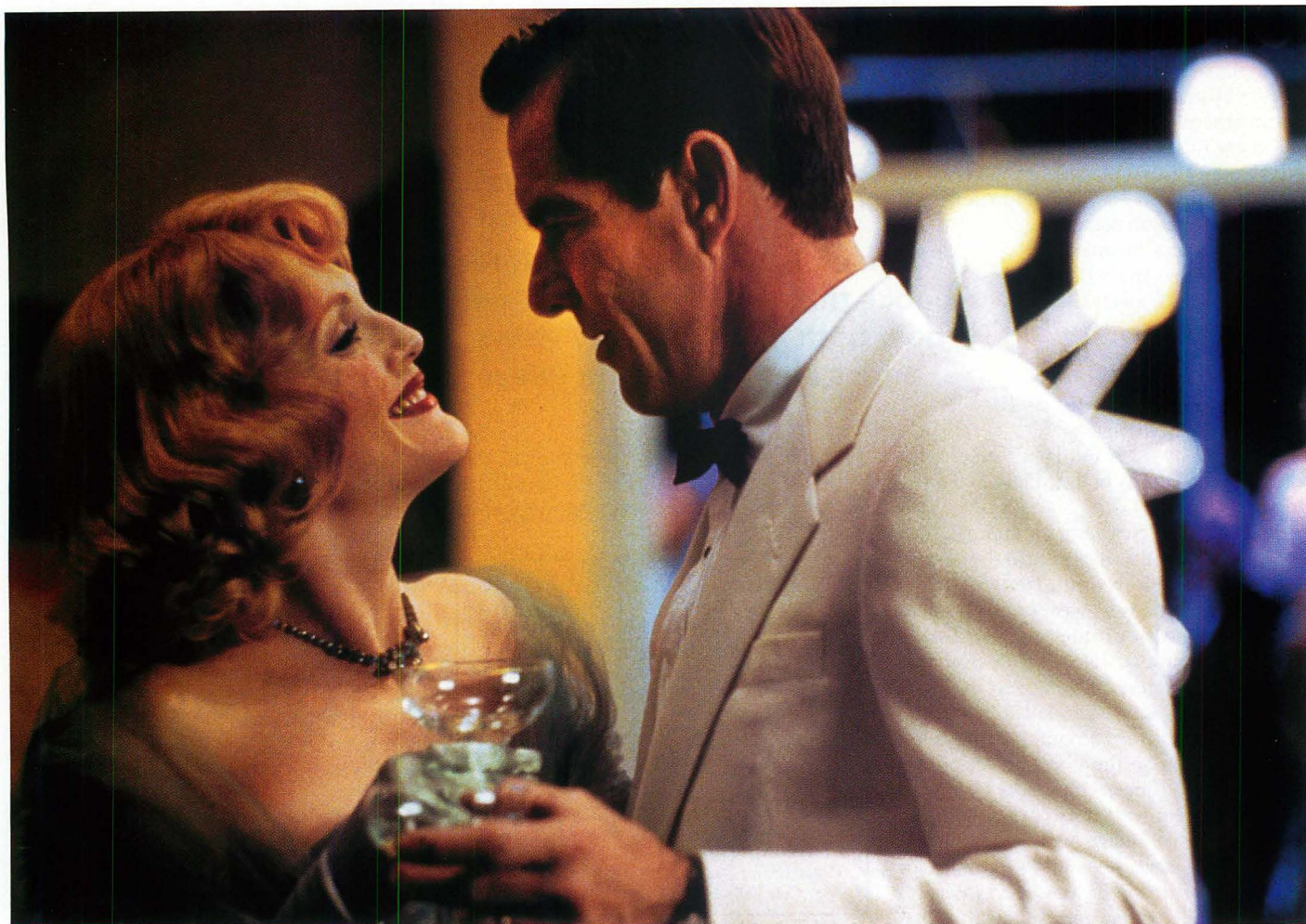
Russo's book resides in its political analysis of social and cultural homophobia—certainly an issue as pertinent today as in 1980. There are two major differences, however,



Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine in *The Children's Hour* (photo courtesy of Photofest).



The eponymous cast members of William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band*, about a group of gay friends at a birthday party (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Cathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore) and her husband Frank (Dennis Quaid), a closeted gay man, in a scene from Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven* (2002) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

like a woman that people find fundamentally distasteful." The reality is that while Russo, reflecting the politics of his time, often leaves no room for ambiguity, contemporary queer readings of films are often predicated entirely on exploring, and celebrating, this ambiguity.

Russo's work need not be disparaged, but I've spent some time on *The Celluloid Closet* in order to highlight the major shifts that have occurred over the past two decades. Much of academic queer and feminist film studies grew out of, and are inseparable from, the political analysis engendered by both Gay Liberation and Second Wave feminism. Both of these movements were inspired by aspects of the Frankfurt School and became concerned with understanding and grappling with popular culture. Academic queer film studies now finds itself in the sometimes awkward position of responding both to a need to continue to professionalize its work as well as to wrestle with the changing state of the market, which is now utterly different than it was a decade ago, never mind three decades.

This cultural shift is, to varying degrees, apparent in the three volumes of recent queer film writing under review. Matthew Hays's *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers* is, in some respects, a throwback to the early days of gay movement film writing and commentary. Hays is a Montreal-based journalist and critic who specializes in writ-

"If we think about the future of queer cinema—and of queer cinema studies—we'll have to take very seriously how much the world of 'gay movies' has changed in the past ten years and how very different it is than thirty-five years ago."

ing on queer culture. This collection of thirty-two interviews with lesbian and gay male filmmakers gives us a nice, although very general and anecdotal, overview of the past sixty years of queer film history. Beginning with Kenneth Anger—whose 1947 experimental short *Fireworks* is arguably the beginning of modern queer film—to John Cameron Mitchell on *Shortbus* (2006), Hays gives us an admittedly haphazard journey

that highlights some of the thoughts of noted directors. Because this is a collection of newspaper and magazine articles—often resonant of the in-awe fan style of *The Village Voice*'s Arthur Bell, an early commentator on queer pop culture and a close friend of Vito Russo—its overall impact often feels marginal since Hays, often a perceptive interviewer, cannot make a sustained argument.

But what the volume does do very well is give us a sense of the multiplicity of queer sensibilities working today. While veterans such as Rosa von Praunheim and John Waters don't say much that is new, Hays does manage to elicit some interesting comments about the queer sensibility of the

Chucky movies from director Don Mancini, and his questions to Eytan Fox and Gal Uchovsky—*Yossi & Jagger* (2002) and *The Bubble* (2006)—prompt interesting ideas about the relationship of international queer cinema to Hollywood film as well as U.S. politics.

Serious film scholars may find aspects of *The View from Here* interesting, although they may be put off by the ephemeral nature of the pieces. What the volume does do is

reinforce the point that actual contemporary queer film culture—as opposed to queer film studies—is far more wide ranging and eclectic than ever before. But in doing so—remember those hundreds of films in the TLA catalog—it also raises two important issues. In this plethora of new queer film there is an amazing amount of commercial, sometimes even unwatchable, junk. This is, of course, simply a byproduct of capitalism—if there is a perceived audience someone, somewhere, will make a product to market to it—but film scholars will have to begin deciding how to understand and write about this phenomena. Does this mean that, along with articles on the queer sensibility of George Cukor or Dorothy Arzner, we will be seeing scholarly pieces on “The Queerness of Chucky” or “Narratives of Orality in *Eating Out* and *Eating Out 2*” two highly popular, but inanely stupid, gay male films? The question “Is the proliferation of junky queer films a good thing” is beside the point; they are there and many are quite popular. But scholars will have to come to grips with not only what this new cultural moment might mean, but also with the idea that as the very category of “queer film” has grown enormously, the category itself may have become meaningless, both commercially and critically. These are new questions—queer film studies being such a new field—that have never had to be faced in the past.

One mark of how far we have come from the world in which Vito Russo existed is the publication of James Morrison’s excellent anthologies, *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows* and Jim Stacy’s often illuminating *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Could Russo—or for that matter Richard Dyer or B. Ruby Rich—have ever imagined a time when an openly gay director’s overtly gay work would be taken so seriously or that a dis-

tinctly gay male-themed film would receive so much critical adulation? But more important, how do Haynes’s films, or *Brokeback Mountain*, fit into the critical percepts that these critics articulated two decades ago?

As products of academic film scholarship, both of these books are welcome addition to the literature on queer film. Unlike Hays’s *The View from Here: Conversations with Gay and Lesbian Filmmakers*, they are not intended for the average queer filmgoer and are centered on asking vital questions about specific works of art. While each volume presents us with distinctive strengths and weaknesses, they all demonstrate that queer film criticism—in response to a number of factors—has matured enormously over the past decade. Here are two collections of essays that examine in minute, complex detail queer themed work with no mention of positive/negative images or the effect of representation on realpolitik. Indeed there are few mentions of politics at all. Which is not to say that these books do not emanate from a political consciousness, but rather, perhaps, that they have moved beyond the need to articulate such a position.

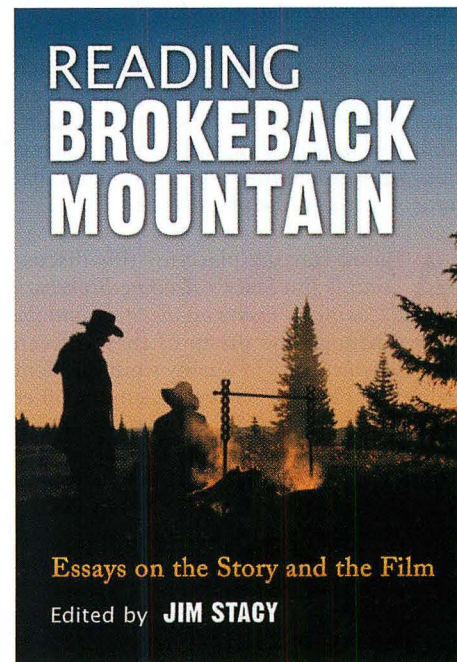
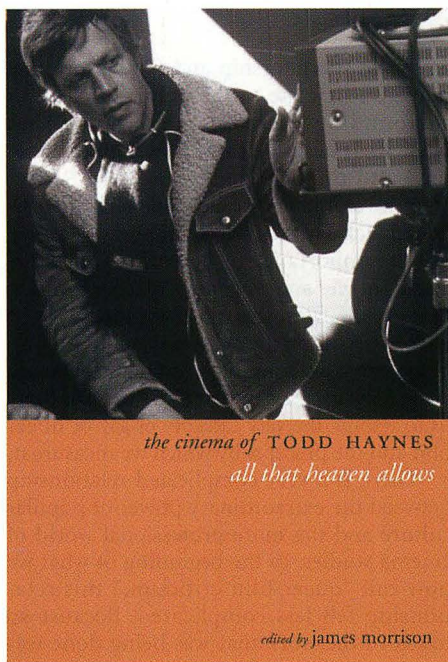
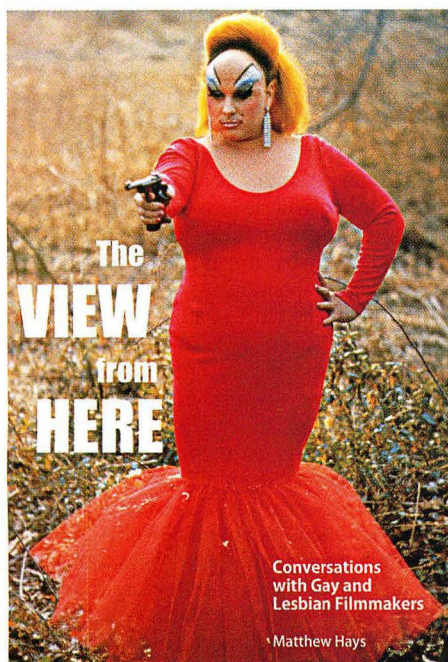
The essays in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes: All That Heaven Allows* deal with myriad issues relating to his body of work: Haynes’s relationship to Jean Genet; how AIDS functions as an allegory in *Safe*; the political use of nostalgia in *Far From Heaven*; Haynes’s use of television to explicate queer childhood in *Dottie Gets Spanked*; Haynes’s thematic relationship to Rainer Werner Fassbinder. And because of their specificity these essays are able to present detailed discussions of aspects of Haynes’s work. James Morrison’s “Todd Haynes in Theory and Practice,” for instance, beautifully sets up a convincing “system” in

which we can understand Haynes’s films in direct relationship to one another (“*Safe*,” for instance, ‘answers’ *Superstar*”). And he argues that Haynes’s films are not simply infused with theory—from Freud and Adorno to Kristeva and Baudrillard—but actually predicated upon these theorists’ work. It’s an intriguing idea and Morrison is moderately convincing, but the real power of his piece is that Haynes has constructed a self-contained moral universe that answers its own questions and then questions its own answers.

Scott Higgins’s “Orange and Blue, Desire and Loss: The Colour Score in *Far From Heaven*” deals deftly with how Haynes mimics, yet radically transforms, Sirk’s sense of color in *All That Heaven Allows* in *Far From Heaven*. This feels, at times, like standard film studies, but what Higgins does here is something more complicated, which is to covertly question the politics of nostalgia. This is a vital point in discussing *Far From Heaven*, and I wish that Higgins had gone further, especially in exploring how Haynes—whose work sometimes borders on camp—draws upon a distinctly gay male sensibility in doing this.

Perhaps the best, and I think most important, essay in this collection is Alexandra Juhasz’s “From the Scenes of Queens: Genre, AIDS, and Queer Love.” Here, drawing upon her own relationship with Haynes, her experience as an AIDS activist, and her friendships with gay male friends with AIDS, Juhasz painstakingly locates Haynes’s esthetic work in concrete political and historical contexts, and thus makes the works far more alive than most “film studies” pieces do, even though she uses much of the same language and ideas. It is an excellent example of what “queer studies” might, and can, do.

But the question that underlies this volume—and is never articulated—is what will Todd Haynes’s place be in film history?



This, I think, is a complicated question that really gets to the heart of where queer cinema studies is today. While past scholars have done a splendid job explicating the role of an often closeted *gay sensibility* in the work of noted Hollywood directors such as James Whale, Mitchell Leisen, and Vincente Minnelli, recent scholarship is now faced with coming up with new ways to evaluate the shape and the form of gay sensibility in the works of a new wave of film directors who are openly gay, and often draw upon the work of past artists. Much of this volume—as wonderful as some of the work is—feels like an ongoing argument for the canonization of Haynes as a major American artist.

And certainly that is a great argument to make—and the answer is probably “yes”—but it is an argument that has to be made in the broader context of what place queer cinema holds in the larger world of film today. What is the relationship between cross-over queer cinema—and one could argue that *Far from Heaven* or *I'm Not There* are fine examples of this cross-over—and mass spectatorship? Might this mean that the very category of “queer film” is in danger of being erased or blurred out of extinction? Since so much of past queer film criticism has been devoted to (as in *The Celluloid Closet*) exposing the injustices done to queer people in popular culture or opening closets and uncovering a coded queer past that a vigorous investigation—as B. Ruby Rich begins in her famous 1992 piece “New Queer Cinema”—new work has the responsibility of taking this legacy into consideration while examining all of the changes that have occurred in the past decade.

A good starting place for this discussion is Jim Stacy's *Reading Brokeback Mountain: Essays on the Story and the Film*. Through the prism of these fifteen essays—which vary in quality from excellent to the semiobvious—Stacy has, among other things, attempted to place *Brokeback Mountain* in a historical context that dissects it from a number of angles that implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, attempts to understand the position of the film as a conduit between queer culture and mass culture. There are provocative essays here that specifically explore the “queering” of popular culture. Noah Tsika's “The Queerness of

Country: *Brokeback's* Soundscape” is a fine exploration of how the film uses, and subverts, the conventions of country music to make its points. Xinghua Li's “From Nature's Love to Natural Love: *Brokeback Mountain*, Universal Identification, and Gay Politics” uses Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau to dexterously locate the film's juggling of its desire to be both specific and universal. But there is again an underlying question here that is only semiarticulated: why did *Brokeback Mountain*, for all of its “queerness,” become not simply a successful film but a media event? Was it—or will it be remembered as—that breakthrough film that some queer viewers suggested it was, spawning more popular gay-themed films and making a real difference in how mainstream film culture thinks about LGBT content? Certainly, the untimely death of Heath Ledger in January may generate a whole new series of essays about the complicated dynamics of

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simply about exploring the possibilities of a new discipline and the fact that it was, most often, being done in the popular press, made the connection between popular culture and cinema studies explicit. That is less true now, and it placed some of the basic tenets of the discipline in question. Indeed, queer studies itself—an exciting, and often perplexing volatile mix of theory and politics—is often, because of its sprawling, even somewhat amorphous nature, often purposefully unable to produce a single cohesive theory. This, in the context of an (often unacknowledged) constantly changing queer popular culture, makes for a confusing situation.

The other profound change—and I think this may be the most important one—that has occurred is a generational one. Many of the scholars now in graduate school were not yet born when Parker Tyler, Richard Dyer, B. Ruby Rich, and Vito Russo began publishing. They have grown up with their work and have, to varying degrees, built upon it. But they—and even younger LGBT people—matured in a world in which LGBT cinema has become something very different than it was in 1980. Most of my undergraduate students have never heard of *The Children's Hour* or *Cruising*—never mind *Mädchen in Uniform* or *Fox and His Friends*—and are far more familiar with commercial fluff like *Another Gay Movie* or *Saving Face*, and of course *Queer as Folk* and



Heath Ledger (1979-2008) was nominated for an Academy Award for his performance in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

gay male spectatorship and fan culture that may give new life to the public discussions surrounding *Brokeback*. It certainly isn't what Rich described in “New Queer Cinema” and one wonders what Vito Russo, were he still alive, would have felt when he added Jack Twist to his Necrology.

The importance of both *The Cinema of Todd Haynes* and *Reading Brokeback Mountain*—aside from the value of many of their entries—is that they, intentionally or not, pinpoint not just some of the extraordinary work being done in queer cinema today but also force us to rethink the very category of gay or queer film and the precepts by which we measure it.

There is a very complicated relationship between the extraordinary power of popular culture and the more professional world of cinema studies. In the beginning of what we now call “queer film criticism,” this relationship felt less complicated. Because so much of the work that was being done was

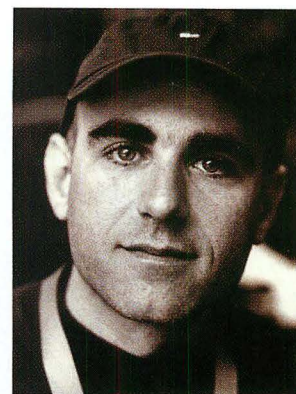
The L Word. It's not that they don't come to love and appreciate these older films as they get to know them—but they know them in a much different way than I did in 1964 or 1985. This is the difference that older queer film scholars will have to acknowledge and recognize if queer film studies is going to proceed in any fruitful and exciting manner.

If we think about the future of queer cinema—and of queer cinema studies—we'll have to take very seriously how much the world of “gay movies” has changed in the past ten years and how very different it is from thirty-five years ago. In some ways *The Cinema of Todd Haynes* and *Reading Brokeback Mountain* are using an older context to analyze one aspect of a new, and constantly changing, phenomenon. They offer valuable analyses but we need to move beyond them as well and to understand—in the largest historic and political context possible—the impact, and the potential, of queer cinema today. ■

Surviving a Futile War:

An Interview with Joseph Cedar

by Leonard Quart



Joseph Cedar is a talented, young Israeli director who had directed two films—a thriller, *Time of Favor* (2000) and a film about the world of religious Zionist settlers, *Campfire* (2004)—before he made *Beaufort*. Both were box-office hits in Israel, and swept Israel's Academy Awards. But with *Beaufort*—nominated this year for an Academy Award as Best Foreign Language Film—he has taken an artistic leap forward and begun to fully realize his potential as a filmmaker—making a much more ambitious, penetrating film than his earlier, more conventional works.

Beaufort depicts the last days in 2000 of a small, isolated group of Israeli soldiers, who are stationed in a concrete and steel dugout maze in the backyard of Lebanon's Beaufort Castle (built by the Crusaders in the twelfth century, it has over the years changed hands many times, including being held by the PLO during the Lebanese Civil War in the Seventies). The soldiers are part of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), who are withdrawing from southern Lebanon, where they have been posted since the First War in Lebanon in 1982.

The enemy, Hezbollah, remains unseen except for the constant incoming missile and rocket explosions that are laconically announced over a loudspeaker. Working with a comparatively low budget, at least by the standards of an American war film, Cedar (him-

self an IDF veteran) creates remarkable tension out of the soldiers' anxiety and claustrophobic confinement, punctuated by numerous cacophonous scenes where blinding smoke and flames suddenly overwhelm their stifling and, for the viewer, disorienting fortification. The oppressiveness and boredom of the long battle is reinforced by a limited palette of color dominated by green and grayish-brown tones, almost exclusively shot within the dark labyrinth of the underground tunnels that have been built to provide refuge for the soldiers from the bombing. The world outside is barely seen, except for a few shots of the bleakly striking landscape, but that's also where death emanates from—so it's no refuge.

The film's central figure is *Beaufort*'s brooding, melancholy twenty-two-year-old commander, Lt. Liraz (Oshri Cohen). He's a professional soldier whose whole identity is so obsessively wrapped up in serving the army that hesitated making him an officer. But in blindly adhering to orders he sacrifices the lives of men like Ziv (Ohad Knoller)—a demolition expert ordered unnecessarily to remove an explosive device from a road the IDF were anyhow planning to give up to Hezbollah.

The other soldiers are less defined—most are very young men with ordinary dreams of becoming musicians or visiting a girlfriend in New Jersey after the war. All of them are weary of the war, and most see Liraz as an “asshole.” Although usually shot in tight close-up, the soldiers tend to blur together in their green camouflage uniforms and heavy gear, so we don't have an easy time distinguishing one character from another. The most distinctive is the tough, conscience-stricken, compassionate medic, Koris (Itay Tiran), who is repelled by the pointless deaths that holding the fort involves, and is enraged with Liraz's inability to break with the orders he has received.

After Liraz, frozen with fear, fails to go to the aid of his wounded friend Oshri (Eli Etanyo), he angrily begins to question his role at Beaufort. He confronts the army staff about their lack of concern about his troops, who remain sitting ducks at an outpost that is due to be surrendered. Ultimately, he acquiesces to his superiors' orders. Liraz, finally, is too invested in his military commitment to break the rules. But he begins to soften towards the men under his command—demonstrating an empathy and concern that he never expressed previously. He too just wants to go home.

None of the soldiers in Cedar's film embrace the war, or indulge in vainglorious heroics. They just hope to survive a battle that they know is futile. But they also don't engage in explicit political critiques of the government. Cedar makes it clear that their officers have callously abandoned them, but he stays with the consciousness of the soldiers, rather than grafting on to the film a larger, critical view of the Israeli-Arab conflict or Israeli military policy. It makes for a very grounded, concrete film that emphasizes emotional immediacy over intellectual

and political debate. It's sympathetic to the Israeli soldiers, but not to the army hierarchy that has sent them there.

Cedar has made a quietly powerful, antiwar film that implicitly suggests, without much elaboration or exposition, that there is

something terribly wrong with Israeli policies. It's a point of view echoed, in very different ways, in the work of other contemporary Israeli filmmakers like Eytan Fox and Amos Gitai. The filmmakers have no answers to the Mideast miasma. At the moment, nothing seems to get negotiations off the ground between the Palestinians and Israelis, and the lethal stalemate sometimes feels eternal. But in their dissent from the status quo, the filmmakers affirm a notion of justice, decency, and common humanity that gets lost in the murderous cycle of Palestinian terrorism and Israeli military retribution. I spoke with Joseph Cedar about his film for *Cineaste* in the offices of his U.S. distributor, Kino International, in New York in November. —Leonard Quart

Cineaste: What sort of effect have your personal experiences had on your films?

Joseph Cedar: All three of my films—*Time of Favor*, *Campfire*, and *Beaufort* deal with subjects that I'm intimately familiar with but they're not necessarily biographical. I think that my authority as a director on the set has to do with understanding certain situations deriving from my own personal experience. But none of the films literally portray my life. *Campfire* is probably the closest since it takes place in the neighborhood where I grew up, and deals with a situation that I went through. But none of the characters are modeled after me.

Cineaste: I assume you basically see yourself as an Israeli and not an American, despite your growing up here until you were six and then coming back to attend film school at NYU.

Cedar: I'm an Israeli, though I do feel a bit of an outsider in Israel

Past and present history converge in *Beaufort*, Joseph Cedar's portrait of the Israeli-Lebanon conflict, Israel's Academy Award nominee this year for Best Foreign Language Film.



Israeli Defense Force demolition specialist Ziv (Ohad Knoller, left) prepares to disarm a roadside mine in Joseph Cedar's *Beaufort*.

but not necessarily because I'm an American. It has to do with being brought up in an observant—a religious Zionist—family, and then ending up working in a very secular environment.

Cineaste: Are you still religiously observant?

Cedar: Yes, in a very loose manner. I'm trying to transmit to my children something that I had as a child. Though the religion was never that theologically oriented, it was always more cultural and social in nature.

Cineaste: Your two early films, *Time of Favor* and *Campfire*, are critical of the self-righteousness and rigidity of the settlement ethos and its tendency to subordinate women. Do the West Bank settlements arouse any positive feelings in you?

Cedar: I lived in the settlements for two years when I was writing *Time of Favor*. And before I actually lived there I had different feelings about the whole movement. But my experience there shed a different light on things. Still, I have positive feelings towards the national religious community because in some ways I remain part of it. But I continue to be critical of certain aspects of that milieu. Most of my family and close friends, outside my professional world, continue to be settlers. I think that the tribal, conformist elements of this movement aren't exclusive to them. Any ideological group creates pressure on an individual to stay in line—to subscribe to their ideology. In *Campfire*, the best illustration of the need to conform has no political overtones, but takes place during the sexual assault scene at the campfire. Most audiences see that scene through the eyes of the young girl victim. In my mind, however, something more complicated is going on. There is a young boy in the group who has feelings for the girl, and knows that what the other boys are doing to her is wrong. But he's also a victim—he lacks the courage to stop it.

The same actor who plays the fort commander in *Beaufort* plays the boy in *Campfire*. And in *Beaufort* he's basically in the same situation, and lacks the will to break from what he views as destructive military orders, because he's loyal to the system. *Campfire* is all

about how the group of religious Zionists needs to feel that everyone in the group must conform, and view as a threat anyone who is a little different. Also, in *Campfire* the young man who initiates the sexual molestation of the girl is wearing a military uniform, which itself grants a certain kind of power that is very hard to say no to. That isn't exclusive to the settlers; Israelis in general are victims of the kind of pressure that uniform wearers bear.

Cineaste: Did your first two films appeal to audiences outside of Israel?

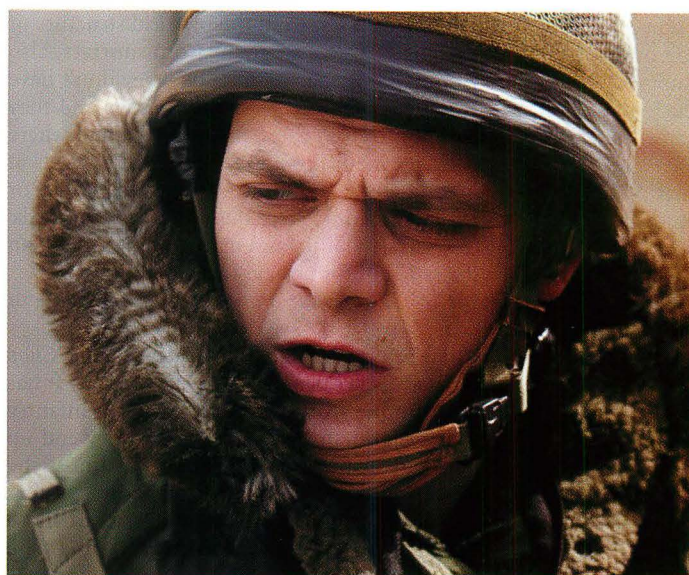
Cedar: Not enough. I would have liked them to cross over. But I'm caught in a contradiction because I don't like most films that do. They usually come at the expense of authenticity. Every once in a while there's a film that does very well with Israeli audiences and, miraculously, touches on some kind of universal theme, like Koshashvili's *Late Marriage* (2001), about an overbearing Georgian immigrant family in Israel. It's very a good film, and very specific in its detail, but it also has universal appeal. I'm not sure I know how to bridge that gap, but if I have to make the choice I feel myself addressing my home viewers before I try to reach out to a broader audience.

Cineaste: In *Beaufort*, you've chosen to make a more severe, and socially penetrating and much less, commercial work—no romance or heroics or genre-film cross-cutting to build tension. Also it's a much more formally conscious film—long shots, tight close-ups, and claustrophobic sets. What moved you in this direction as a filmmaker?

Cedar: My first two films were successful and each film is a response to the one that precedes it. You do one film and you try to take some lessons from that experience and apply them to the next. As a result, in the second film, *Time of Favor*, I went on the set with the screenplay that I was absolutely satisfied with. The result was that in the editing room the creative process stopped. It felt like we finished telling the story while writing it. And then, yes, you're still anxious, you have to direct the actors and you have to get everything going, but figuring out what the story was about ended on my laptop.



Lt. Liraz (Oshri Cohen), the 22-year-old commander, in *Beaufort*.



Koris (Itay Tiran), the unit's openly critical medic, in *Beaufort*.

When starting to make the third film I had a larger budget, because of the credit I accrued from the first two films. It could have led me in two directions. One direction would have been to go deeper into the mainstream and to produce a more conventional type of film.

The other was to do something that was a little riskier. The risk that was most significant for me was going on the set still trying to figure out the story. Because the film is primarily shot on one location it allowed us some flexibility. We started with a 160-page screenplay with all kinds of plot lines that I knew in advance would not make the final cut. So I continued to look for the story as we were shooting it. And then the editing process on this film was something that I've never experienced. It was really retelling the story over again, trying to figure out what we have and what works, and where the heart of the story is. So I hope to continue in that direction. It was a very satisfying process, and it felt like we were tackling something that was very complicated at the beginning, and by the end somehow this very large topic of eighteen years of occupation in Lebanon felt containable. It felt like we were able to create a reasonable structure for the narrative.

Cineaste: Do you expect the film to attract an audience outside of Israel?

Cedar: Well, it was phenomenally successful in Israel. We had sold-out screenings at 3:00 a.m. in the morning. I think that had a lot to do with the film's very high profile. I hope it attracts a large audience in the U.S., but you never know.

Cineaste: In what way was the film cathartic for you?

Cedar: There are some scenes in the film that allowed me to convey something that was burning inside me, like the final scene where the set of the outpost is destroyed. I can't say that it was similar to actually blowing up this historic fortress but it was similar in that it felt good to finally be over with it. At the same time it left me with an empty feeling. Still, it's very hard to explain how you can feel relieved and empty at the same time, but that final scene achieved that visually and dramatically.

The scene has also almost a direct reference to Masada. I grew up both in my youth movement and in the army with the Masada story as a role model. It was a story about Jews who refused to surrender to the enemy—the Romans—and committed suicide to maintain

their pride. It was seen as an educational story that had great ethical value. *Beaufort* is almost the exact reverse of Masada. Instead of committing suicide to protect the mountain, they blow up the mountain only to stay alive. They swallow their pride and admit defeat—to save whatever lives can be saved. So the film moves 180 degrees in the opposite way from Masada.

Cineaste: The film seems much less a critique of Israeli policy than an antiwar film.

Cedar: Yes, we treated the film as a story that could have taken place anywhere. It treats war as almost inevitable—like a force of nature. And it's not about defeating that force of nature, but about surviving it. So you don't see the enemy and the mortars are almost like rain falling,

they're random. You don't know who is shooting and you don't know why, but they're out there. They're a fact of life and you can either protect yourself or run away from it but you can't ultimately fight it.

Cineaste: In some ways the film resembles a less murderous and warmer

"We treated the film as a story that could have taken place anywhere. It treats war as almost inevitable—like a force of nature. And it's not about defeating that force of nature, but about surviving it."

Paths of Glory.

Cedar: *Paths of Glory* was a very big influence on me not only as a filmmaker, but also as a soldier. The film is so poignant, and accurate. Kubrick knows exactly what he wants to say. It's hard to compare with other war films, because each war created different kinds of films, and you can't really compare a WWI film with a WWII film or with Vietnam films, but it's the best WWI film that I have ever seen.

It's interesting to note that in the last scene of *Paths of Glory*, a young German woman sings in front of French soldiers. The actress's name is Christiane Harlan. Stanley Kubrick fell in love with her and married her. She's his widow, and also the niece of the Nazi film director Viet Harlan, who in the Thirties made several anti-Semitic films, including *Jud Süß* (1940). At the end of the war Harlan was charged with participating in the anti-Semitic movement and aiding the Nazis, but was acquitted. What's noteworthy is that on Kubrick's father's side, the whole family died in the Holocaust.

Cineaste: In *Beaufort*, the soldiers themselves are exhausted with the war, and see their holding on to the mountain as essentially meaningless. But they never engage in a direct political critique, except for sometimes speaking resentfully of the officers.

Cedar: Yes, the story is told from the soldiers' point of view and we pretty much limited the discussion of the film to what the soldiers

know and understand and care about. Even the physical structure of the outpost, though designed to protect them from mortars, also limits their view. They don't see the larger picture. They don't have the historical context. It's not their business, they have a mission and they can either carry it out or not. Even in those places in the film where there's some political critique, it's always down to what the soldier needs at that point, and not something that has to do with general policy or strategies. There is a point in the film where the soldier who is a medic angrily voices that nobody cares about them. I'm not sure if that's an accurate depiction of the IDF, but for him, at that point, it is true.

Cineaste: Besides *Paths of Glory* what other films influenced your direction of *Beaufort*?

Cedar: There's a film that influenced me a great deal—*Pork Chop Hill* (1959), directed by Lewis Milestone. It's a great B movie. It has no pretensions. It's just a simple story that starts with an infantry division at the bottom of a mountain and depicts how they end up on the top of the mountain. In that sense *Beaufort* is almost the reverse of that. It starts at the top and depicts the slow, gradual descent from the mountain. But there was something about those war films that felt very clean to me. They didn't try to be melodramatic. They didn't try to say something profound about the world. They were just, you know, so down to earth and I liked that.

I also had a very deep appreciation for *The Thin Red Line* (1998)—it's this meditative, beautiful, philosophical essay on war. But I felt paralyzed contemplating doing something so large that I felt I couldn't clearly do. As a result, I found myself referring to much smaller war films that were focused on more graspable canvases—like *Pork Chop Hill*. Another film that was a significant influence—at least visually—was Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981). What was amazing in *Das Boot* is that you go through the whole story from the point of view of these soldiers, and then at the end you find out that they are the enemy. Also, the film's narrowing of the setting's physical space, so that you don't see the larger picture until the end, influenced me in making *Beaufort*. I tried to limit the film to a very small place because that's what the soldiers' experience is. They never see the larger picture.

Cineaste: Were you satisfied with your leading actor's performance as Liraz—the fort's commander—or did you feel he could have done more with his character's emotional transformation?

Cedar: If I were making a Hollywood film out of the story, he would make the decision to blow up the post on his own, and go through a radical transformation. But this is a very delicate situation that the character has to deal with. He's someone whose manhood is dependent on his job as a commander, and that comes from a very low self-esteem and almost no self-confidence. So he needs that position, he needs the mountain to feel part of something bigger than himself. And his mission is to slowly retreat, so he's asked to withdraw from a place that has given him significance in life. As the film progresses he has to somehow find an alternative meaning. He has to find something that will substitute for the identity that the army gave him. When he's confronted with his own fear, when he realizes he's not the soldier that he wants to be, he's forced to find something else. Suddenly he's able to get closer to the soldiers because he becomes vulnerable himself, and the film ends with him shedding all his own protection, and then he opens up emotionally.

Cineaste: Does he ever disobey orders?

Cedar: He may not have the courage to blow up the outpost on his own. But he is able to remove the last guard post by himself. When he tells the frightened soldier, "OK, don't go back up," it might sound like something small compared to getting the soldiers out of harm's way, but, actually, if you're a young officer, removing a guard post is a very significant act. It's not something that he could have done at the beginning of the film.

Cineaste: The film offers no explicit political answers. I just wanted to know your take on Israeli military policies?

Cedar: First of all, I have no easy answers for anything. Secondly, most of the writing of the film occurred while Israel was involved with its disengagement from Gaza and, in an indirect way, I think it's a film about the nation's relationship to power. Whether we can afford to give up our power symbols in return for moral integrity? Or can we give up our concrete control over land in return for feeling just? I don't have answers to those questions. But I feel I



Israeli Defense Force soldiers run for cover from incoming Hezbollah missiles in Joseph Cedar's Academy Award-nominated film, *Beaufort*.

must ask whether blowing the outpost up at the film's end leaves the Israelis stronger or weaker? I think it leaves them stronger but I'm not sure most Israelis will agree.

Cineaste: *You didn't feel there was a necessity to go back into Lebanon in 2006?*

Cedar: I saw no imperative to go to war. I found nothing surprising about Israel's failure to achieve its military goals. What surprised me was that six years after we withdrew from Lebanon we wanted to go back in.

Cineaste: *That clearly puts you at odds with most of Israeli public opinion. For even the county's major writers like Amos Oz, David Grossman and A.B. Yehoshua, who were usually critical of Israeli Mideast policies, supported the war, albeit with a number of qualifications.*

Cedar: Well, it's not that I had an opportunity to publicly state my opinion, but I think Israelis were misled in the way that the government convinced them that the war was a necessity. Although I don't have a public role, the writers you mentioned do. What happened, however, is that they wanted to be patriotic and stand behind the men on the front, but at the same time critique the decision-makers. Those three writers are seen as having a responsibility towards maintaining the morale of the people, and that sense of obligation kept them from saying what should have been said. When the country's at war everyone wants to support the national effort, and the government rationale for the war was presented as a mission to bring back the three kidnapped soldiers.

Cineaste: *I thought the primary reason for the invasion was to destroy Hezbollah's stockpile of missiles in southern Lebanon?*

Cedar: But everyone was questioning if it was truly possible to destroy the stockpile. So if that were the publicly suggested reason for the mission, the government wouldn't have had a popular consensus. The consensus was about bringing back our men. It's as if the Israelis didn't learn anything from the first Lebanon War. If you look at the first eighteen years we were there, Hezbollah kept improving their weapons and gaining more military experience, and we kept on improving our fortifications, so the only way to end it was to leave. Going back in 2006 was just a way of getting the cycle going again and no one wants that cycle. In fact, in 2000 public opinion was so strongly against being in Lebanon that the only way for the government to be elected was to promise a retreat.

Cineaste: *Getting back to the film, what was the significance of the TV interview with the dead demolition expert's father, where he speaks of betraying his son, because he didn't give him the tools for survival?*

Cedar: It's based on something that I heard from my father, though not word for word. My father grew up in Morristown, New Jersey, in a middle-class, very protective family. My grandfather worked in a brassiere factory and my grandmother was a housewife. There were two kids and, if there was one thing that my father knew in the household that he grew up in, it was that he was the most valuable thing my parents had. It was an assimilated Jewish family but people that left Europe were still very protective of their children's physical safety. Then he moved to Israel where his four sons served in infantry units, and we all knew how to scuba dive, go mountain climbing, and trek around the world.

While I was writing this film, a neighbor of ours was killed in a really terrible accident right before he went into the army. Around us there were all of these soldiers who were either dying on duty or in accidents. My father then told me, "I think we're doing something wrong in promoting army service, and giving your generation the message that adventurousness is a positive thing and confronting fear is something to be encouraged." But he felt that despite his growing up in a milieu where facing danger was seen as a bad thing, he reduced the value of life by not giving his sons that basic instinct of fear.

Cineaste: *The film alludes to a protest group called Four Mothers? Who are they, and what makes them significant?*

Cedar: It's a group founded in the late 1990s by four mothers whose sons were serving in Lebanon, and who were just trying to get them back home safe. They had no political ideology, but they were a remarkable grass-roots movement in Israel. It's unprecedented that in Israel, like in any country that's at war, the military's decisions are rarely questioned. Here were four mothers, however, who had

absolutely no knowledge of military strategies and goals, who changed the nature of the Israeli dialog. All they were saying was, "Save our kids and that's it." Prime Minister Ehud Barak said that one of the reasons he withdrew the troops from Lebanon in 2000 was because of the pressure brought by this movement.

Cineaste: *Did the Israeli government cooperate with the film's production?*

Cedar: There was no official policy decision, but they didn't object to it. The production company was in touch with different military and government officials, but I don't think that it had more substance than just a practical cooperation.

Cineaste: *What was the reaction of the Israeli army and government after the film came out?*

Cedar: It is to their credit that they understood that it's better to be part of the story than to oppose it. But then when the film came out there was this whole debate around the fact that most of the cast didn't serve in the army, and then some of the high-ranking officers had a problem endorsing the film because it was interpreted as supporting the draft dodgers. Among the eleven actors in the film, six didn't serve in the army for medical or mental reasons or because they were conscientious objectors. I thought it was ludicrous to expect actors to actually have military experience. It's something that only Israelis would believe. I think that there's a connection between a talent for acting and not being suitable for military service. There's a connection, and you see it when you're auditioning people in that age range. Most of the actors didn't serve in the army.

Cineaste: *Do contemporary Israeli directors like Amos Gitai (Free Zone, 2006) and Eytan Fox (The Bubble, 2007), who are critical of Israel's Mideast policies, have much in common?*

Cedar: I don't think that Gitai and Fox have anything in common. They have very different esthetics and points of view. You may assume that a national cinema has something stylistic or ideological in common, but when you get down to the particulars, it's not really true. In a country like Israel screenwriters, not producers, initiate most projects. What Israeli filmmakers share is a similar film financing system. It's because of the way that the funding works. You have to submit a script and then, if it gets funding, everyone else comes aboard. So most of the film projects derive from a very personal need to tell a story. Yes, you see some trends. For instance, there were a few years when family melodramas were doing well, so more family melodramas came out, but I doubt that it says anything about Israelis.

Cineaste: *Do any Israeli directors make anti-Arab, chauvinist films?*

Cedar: Well, it depends on how you look at it. I think there are some people who will see my film as very patriotic. Arab audiences see it that way. Here's a film that ignores the fact that Israel was an aggressor. It doesn't provide a portrait of the other side, so from that point of view this is a very patriotic film. And I agree with that point of view. My film is very sympathetic to the Israeli soldier as an individual, but not to the Israeli army.

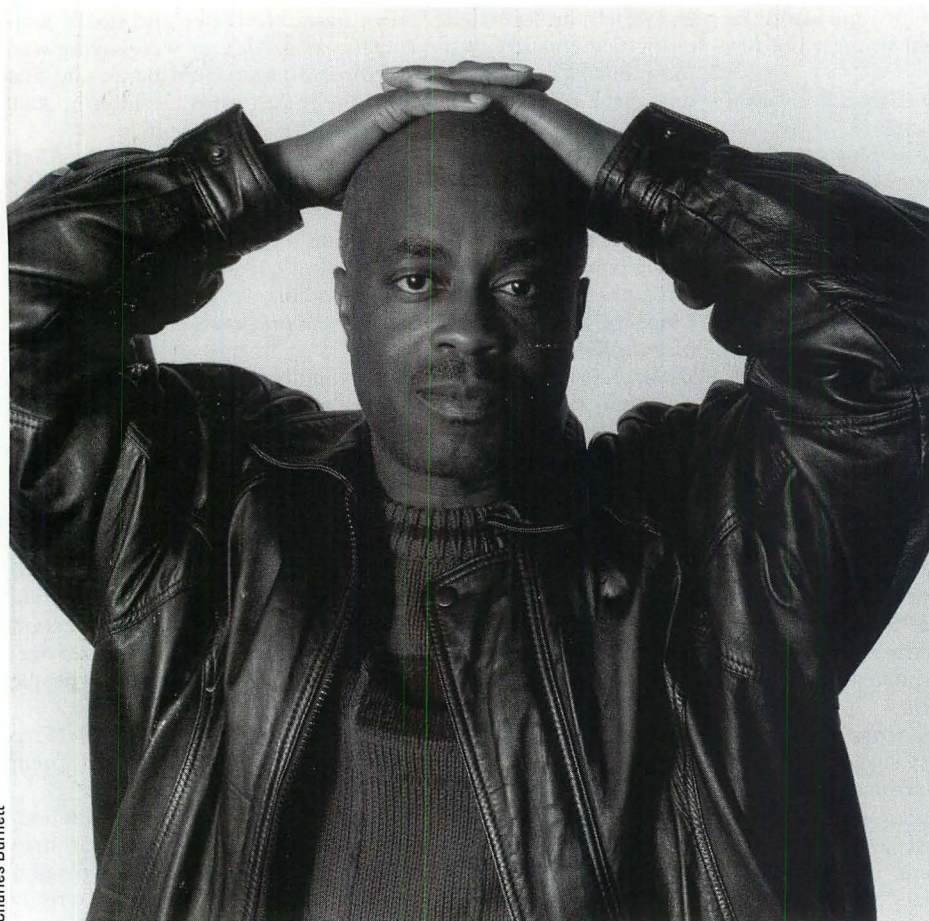
Cineaste: *Are there any directors besides Kubrick, European or American, that helped shape your work or style?*

Cedar: I've always appreciated mainstream American directors who were somehow able to link into the popular culture but, simultaneously, slightly rock the boat. One director I especially liked was Elia Kazan, who worked right in the center of the American film industry. But when you looked at his films, you could see he knew how to use the system and also put across some radical messages. Among today's directors, there is James L. Brooks, who works right in the center and is one of the creators of *The Simpsons*. Some of his feature films are better than others, but I think he understands what American audiences enjoy and he energizes those very appealing stories with a critical, satirical underside.

Cineaste: *Are you aiming in this direction—making popular films that can also, at the same time, be somewhat subversive?*

Cedar: Whether or not I'm consciously aiming to do that, it's what I have ended up doing. ■

Beaufort is distributed by Kino International, 333 West 39th Street, Suite 503, New York, NY 10018, phone (212) 629-6880, www.kino.com.



Good Moments in a Tough World

The Films of Charles Burnett

by Clifford Thompson

Dreams, disorder, and hard-won hope are revealed in the universe of a filmmaker showcased on a new two-disc special-edition DVD from Milestone Film & Video.

For decades, Charles Burnett's film *Killer of Sheep* was nearly as short on luck as one of the African-American Watts residents it portrays. Made for less than ten thousand dollars, shot over a number of years (because one member of Burnett's nonprofessional cast was in prison for much of that time), the film was completed in 1973 but not shown until five years later, and even then not in wide release, since Burnett had not secured rights to the music in it. *Killer of Sheep* did take home the International Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1981, became one of the first fifty films chosen for the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1990, and helped Burnett win a

MacArthur Fellowship "genius" grant in 1988; its honors, in fact, seemed to outnumber its viewers. That changed in 2007, when the film, seen since the 1970s mainly in 16mm prints at film festivals or on clunky machines in libraries (which is how I first saw it), was restored in a gorgeous 35mm print by UCLA and released in theaters at the end of March. Burnett may disagree, but I'll say it anyway: it was worth the wait.

Shot in black and white, *Killer of Sheep* focuses on Stan (played by Henry Gayle Saunders), a resident of a lower-class neighborhood in Watts, married father of two, worker at a sheep slaughterhouse—and insomniac. Stan is never shown lying wide awake in bed, because he has given up even

trying to sleep; he drags himself through his off-hours as he does through his work shifts. He has similarly backed away from any effort to communicate in a meaningful way with his family, particularly his long-suffering wife (Kaycee Moore), from whom he seems cut off emotionally and sexually; the most heartrending scene in the film shows the two slow-dancing to a Dinah Washington song, she kissing his bare chest, he remaining impassive before simply walking away, leaving her in an agony of frustration and yearning.

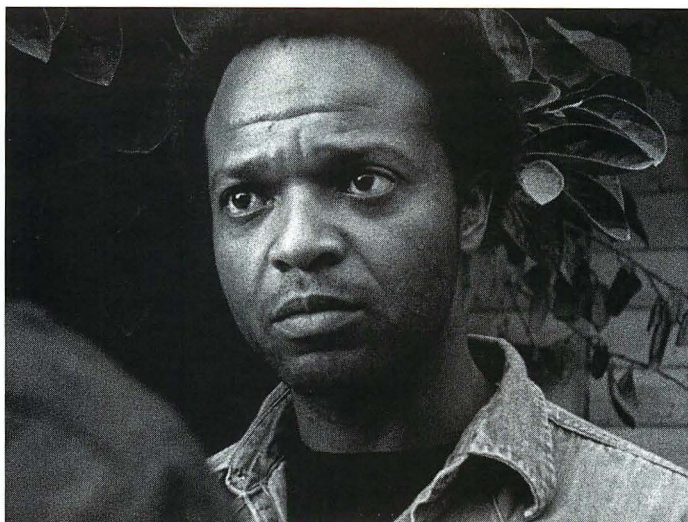
A decade ago, in a piece for *Cineaste* about Burnett's films,¹ I wrote, "Stan's true problem is not that he can't get to sleep but that he seems to be in one long, tiresome dream from which he can't rouse himself; episodes in the film, as in a dream, don't conclude so much as blend into different episodes." True, as far as it goes—but it now seems to me that the foray into the world of dreams in *Killer of Sheep* is deeper and more deliberate than that passage suggests; deeper, even, than that in such surrealist films as Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* or *L'Age d'or*, whose raison d'être seems to have been limited to shocking and teasing. *Killer of Sheep*, by contrast, uses dreamlike sequences to show some eternal and unsettling truths. Show them—not tell them. Indeed, one of the triumphs of *Killer of Sheep* is that it does not interpret for us; as in the world of dreams the film so beautifully emulates, things happen for no spelled-out reasons and in no apparent order—they simply happen, and, like the characters, we make of them what we can.

Stan's emotional detachment seems to be a defense against the bleakness and hopelessness of his surroundings. His environment is one in which people have little and must struggle and fight even for that; the primary focus is on survival. In the pretitle sequence, a boy (young Stan?) is berated by his father and slapped by his mother for not jumping in to help his brother in a fight—never mind that the brother started it. The boy and his brother, the father says, will have only each other if their parents are not around, and so they must stick together. For these characters, morality is synonymous with staying alive, and whatever it takes to do that; as another character later puts it, "Animal's got its teeth, man's got his fists." That line reinforces the connection between the people with whom Stan lives and the animals (sheep) around which he works—an obvious connection, maybe, but one Burnett underscores in subtle and even brilliant ways. (One is a shot, straight up, from ground level, of boys leaping from one rooftop to another. It echoes the jumping of the sheep Stan would be forced to count if he tried to go to sleep, while suggesting the dangerous nature of even the leisure-time pursuits of these characters.) The sheep in the slaughterhouse, of course, have no clue about who is responsible for their condition and little perspective on the condition itself. They're just in it. The same is true of Stan's

peers, who give no thought to the forces dictating the way they live—only to their occasional, doomed efforts to change it.

Which brings us back to the dream world. Two characteristics of dreams are that their logic frequently leads to a dead end, with bizarre details along the way connected to nothing at all, and that, for all the disorder of dreams, they sometimes cut to the heart of what we think, feel, or fear. Those two things would seem to contradict each other, but *Killer of Sheep* goes a long way toward reconciling them. Stan and his friends make two attempts to improve their lives just a little. The first takes Stan and a buddy to the house of a man with a car engine to sell. The scene in the man's home, though it is not technically a dream sequence, does as good a job as anything ever filmed of capturing the subtly askew nature of the things we see as we sleep. The owner of the engine, seated at a table next to his wife but playing cards by himself, wears a suit whose unremarked-upon design would turn heads on a New York City street; lying on the floor is his nephew, nursing wounds from a beating by a man who "didn't have nothing else to do with his hands and feet." The nephew gets into an argument with the wife, who begins beating him herself. Stan and his friend remark on this to the owner of the engine, who, pulling at his very full head of hair, responds, "Can't you see I don't give a damn? My hair's falling out." Why was the nephew beaten up the first time? Why does the man think his hair is falling out, and why has the subject come up at all? Just as well to ask: Why do the characters have to live this way? The answer, in a world—our world—devoid of reason and morality and defined by evil and randomness, is the same in each case: Because. Any other questions?

Once they have the engine, Stan and his friend maneuver it laboriously down several flights of stairs, then place it in the backless bed of a pickup truck parked on a hill. We know what will hap-



Henry Gayle Sanders as Stan in Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) (photo courtesy of Milestone Film & Video).

pen as soon as they try to drive away—and so do they, on some level, as one of them makes clear with his very assurance that everything will be all right. The moment they start up the truck, of course, the engine is thrown to the street and broken beyond repair. As in many a dream, the men see their path heading toward disaster, yet they follow it anyway. The second attempt by Stan and his friends to get ahead involves a drive to a race track to put money on a promising horse; on the way they get a flat tire and realize they don't have a spare. Both the engine and race-track sequences involve cars and aborted attempts at forward motion. Who hasn't had the dream in which you try to run but your legs either won't get into a proper rhythm or weigh half a ton each?

and pay attention?

Hard to know. Better, perhaps, to simply focus on the movie's beautiful shots. One of them, one of a number of shots of children playing that intersperse the film, shows boys running to throw rocks at a passing train—from the train's point of view. Some of the shots of the sheep are lovely, one of them particularly so, showing them in an almost ghostly light. They look beautiful, these dumb creatures, making all the more heartbreaking what is not far in their future.

From dreams to reality: in the fall of 2007, Milestone released a two-disc DVD set, *The Charles Burnett Collection*, containing *Killer of Sheep*, four of Burnett's short films, and his full-length work *My*

Brother's Wedding, first shown in theaters in 1983. If *Killer of Sheep* represented a one-upping of surrealist filmmakers' treatment of the dream world, then *My Brother's Wedding* might be said to be Italian neorealism brought to black urban America. Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema*, for example, depicted life in a poor Sicilian fishing village, using non-professional actors from the village itself to tell the story. Burnett did much the same thing with *My Brother's Wedding* (and *Killer of Sheep*, for that matter), using locals to portray conditions in an



Children at play in Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (photo courtesy of Milestone Film & Video).



Everett Silas as Pierce in *My Brother's Wedding* (1983)
(photos courtesy of Milestone Film & Video).



Gaye Shannon-Burnett as Sonia, Pierce's soon-to-be sister-in-law in *My Brother's Wedding*.

impoverished black Los Angeles neighborhood. There, Pierce (Everett Silas), a thirty-year-old employee of his parents' dry-cleaning store, is torn between the upward mobility of his brother and soon-to-be-sister-in-law (which he views as selling out) and the wild ways of his best friend, Soldier (Ronnie Bell), who has just gotten out of prison. Burnett even manages a subtlety missing from *La Terra Trema*, which relied on a voice-over to explain what was before our eyes (to be fair, the Sicilian dialect was reportedly hard to make out even in Italy). *My Brother's Wedding* evokes, without comment, the contrast between the older neighborhood residents' religious values and the danger of the environment where they find themselves; hence the behavior of Pierce's elderly relatives, who interrupt their Bible reading to pick up a gun so they can answer the door.

My Brother's Wedding unfortunately suffers from patches of clumsy dialog and from wretched acting. (Somehow bad performances work better in unintelligible Sicilian.) Worse, those shortcomings do not detract from an otherwise solid story—rather, they distract us from the film's failure to answer a basic question: why is the seemingly normal, generally easygoing Pierce friends with an apparent sociopath whom everybody else would like to see back in the joint? What makes *My Brother's Wedding* worth watching, though, is its success at exploring what has been called “the universal in the particular.” Burnett takes on the everywhere-understood concept of the

generation gap, as it exists in a particular time and place and under a specific set of circumstances—the clash of older people's southern values with the nihilism of their progeny in the big bad city—and examines one young man's struggle to reconcile the things he has been told by his elders and the things he has seen for himself.

“If *Killer of Sheep* represented a one-upping of surrealist filmmakers' treatment of the dream world, then *My Brother's Wedding* might be said to be Italian neorealism brought to black urban America.”

As for the shorts, *The Horse*, a moody, mysterious work from 1973, is the best from a visual perspective; some shots of the doomed animal of the title, in particular, rival the photography in *Killer of Sheep*. Speaking of that film, another of the shorts—*Several Friends* (1969)—could pass, I do not exaggerate, for a series of *Sheep's* outtakes. In *Quiet as Kept* (2007), a family of displaced Hurricane Katrina victims muses about the lessons the disaster has taught them about America. In my earlier piece on Burnett, discussing another of his films, I wrote, “Drama and political message can dance well together, provided drama leads. Here, it struggles in vain to keep up.” That assessment applies word for word to *Quiet as Kept*.

In terms of storytelling, the best of the shorts is *When It Rains*, from 1995. In it, a woman with a young daughter is threatened with eviction for nonpayment of rent. Desperate, she hurries to a nearby outdoor mall, where, amidst a music festival, she finds her

friend Babu (playing himself). With his graying dreadlocks and African-style clothing, Babu looks like a kind of wise village elder; the truth, as we gradually discover, is slightly different. As Babu circulates among his acquaintances, trying with mixed success to raise the money for his friend's rent, he comes to seem less like an all-knowing figure

and more like an ordinary but large-hearted guy willing to drop what he's doing to help the good people around him. At one point, money fresh in hand from a sympathetic acquaintance, he is set upon—before he can take a step—by another fellow,

who calls in a previous loan. In the end, Babu succeeds in helping his friend not through wisdom, but, as he acknowledges with good humor in the voice-over narration, through pure dumb luck—but hey, he'll take it. A funny, sweet little film, *When It Rains* contains the message found in some of Burnett's best work: that in a tough world, the wise enjoy what they can, and are grateful for that. ■

¹ Thompson's article, “The Devil Beats His Wife: Small Moments and Big Statements in the Films of Charles Burnett,” appeared in *Cineaste*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, and was reprinted in *The Best American Movie Writing 1999* (St. Martin's Griffin).

***Killer of Sheep*: The Charles Burnett Collection is a two-disc special edition DVD including the feature films *Killer of Sheep* and *My Brother's Wedding*, and the short films *Several Friends*, *The Horse*, *When It Rains* and *Quiet as Kept*. Distributed by Milestone Film & Video, www.milestonefilms.com.**

Not Just an Abortion Film:

An Interview with Cristian Mungiu

by Richard Porton

While most of Eastern Europe's postwar Communist countries were ruled by bland, if frequently corrupt, figureheads, Romania proved a spectacularly ghoulish exception. Soon after becoming head of the party in 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu took additional, aggressively nationalist measures to distance his regime from the Soviet Union (he was christened "President" in a bogus election in 1974) while adhering to a hardline Stalinist economic model—and encouraging an elaborate cult of personality—that might have made Stalin himself envious. One of his most notorious fiat—Decree 770 issued in 1966—outlawed abortion and proceeded to reward mothers of multiple children with medals and lavish praise for their efforts to build a populous socialist bulwark. Unlike campaigns against abortion in the West, Ceausescu's imposition of mandatory motherhood (at least for women under forty-five) had nothing to do with religious or moral doctrines. It was instead aligned to what the Romanian author Norman Manea terms "the state ownership of human beings"—the obliteration of the private realm enforced by an intractable bureaucracy.

Cristian Mungiu's second feature, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (winner of the Palme d'Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival), breathes life into historical abstractions by delineating the ethical options available to citizens of a police state by fusing a startlingly naturalistic style with the nail-biting tension usually associated with thrillers. Set in a dismal, unnamed provincial city, Mungiu's film demonstrates that, even under totalitarianism, individuals need not be automatons and can defy the iron rule of the state through small, but not insignificant, actions. The banal travails of everyday life in a repressive regime inspire heroic gestures: In one of the most unbalanced friendships in cinematic history, the classically pretty, but astonishingly passive, polytechnic student Gabita (Laura Vasilii), receives a clandestine abortion with the help of her grittier, more resourceful roommate, Otilia (Anamaria Marinca). Not only do this mismatched pair live in fear of the years in prison that await them if the Romanian security apparatus discovers their crime. They must also endure the horrors of dealing with the odious Mr. Bebe (Vlad Ivanov), a back-alley abortionist who forces Otilia and Gabita to assuage his wrath with sexual favors.

The singular brilliance of *4 Months* does not reside, however, in its bare bones narrative but in the wealth of accumulated detail harnessed to illuminate Gabita and Otilia's ever-increasing desperation and anxiety. Shot in real time and featuring exquisitely choreographed long takes, Oleg Mutu's consistently inventive cinematography isolates key moments that pinpoint the protagonists' psychological malaise and social unease. At the film's outset, a shot of Gabita and Otilia's dormitory room reveals a fishbowl with only a paltry amount of water—an image that beautifully encapsulates the young women's sense of being inexorably trapped. Ominously flickering lights in the hotel where the abortion is performed plunge viewers into a veritable twilight zone while the hand-held tracking shots that accompany Otilia, as she tra-

verses the bleak streets of her university town in search of help for her remarkably ungrateful friend, create a heavy fog of suspense that is never lifted. Mungiu's naturalism is uncanny for its ability to intimately acquaint viewers with his protagonists' plight while maintaining a cautious distance. The narcissistic Gabita and the indefatigable Otilia (a brilliant performance by Anamaria Marinca), are captured on film with an impassivity that resembles the stare of a peculiarly empathetic surveillance camera.

4 Months is also noteworthy for insights into the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of class tensions under state socialism. Sharp disparities between the smugness of the professional class (often referred to as the "intelligentsia" in Eastern Europe, a category that traditionally included professionals such as doctors as well as writers and academics)

surface in the depiction of a squirm-inducing birthday party thrown for the mother of Otilia's boyfriend. Beside herself with anxiety at a time when she fears that Gabita's life might be in peril, Otilia must endure the snobbish remarks of party guests who patronize her as coming from "simple

folk" and make snide comments about her family background. With a nod to a famous sociological study by the Hungarian sociologists George Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi, it's arguable that professionals under Communism deployed a pseudoegalitarian mindset in order to achieve "class power." Mungiu's film invokes this paradox without a smidgen of didacticism. An implied analysis of socialist elites is evident in the subtle details of the film's mordantly farcical birthday party: as most of the population suffers, a privileged few sip champagne and eat crême brûlée.

Cineaste interviewed Mungiu shortly before the U.S. premiere of *4 Months* at the New York Film Festival. He was eager to talk about such diverse topics as the relationship of his film to battles over abortion rights in the West, the hype lavished on the so-called "Romanian New Wave," and the psychic damage wrought by Ceausescu's cruel dictatorship. —Richard Porton

Cineaste: You've announced that *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is part of a cycle entitled "Tales from The Golden Age." Although this title is obviously ironic, could you elaborate on its significance? How do you envision the cycle as a whole?

Cristian Mungiu: I don't know if it's obvious to everyone, but the title comes from a reference to "the golden age of Romania," the last nine years of Ceausescu's regime. This is very ironic for Romanians since it was a period of shortages and hardship. The project, "Tales from the Golden Age," evolved from my initial idea to film shorter stories. I initially wrote about six stories that would each last about thirty minutes inspired by urban legends of the period. I wanted to make a subjective, personal history of the late Communist era in Romania—the way in which real people suffered small misfortunes under a big dictatorship. The tone was rather light and, as soon as it



Cristian Mungiu (foreground)



"Mr. Bebe" (Vlad Ivanov), a sleazy back-alley abortionist, meets with prospective client Gabita (Laura Vasiliu, right) and her college roommate Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) in this scene from Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Days and 2 Weeks*.

was finished (and we had even started to preproduce it), young people who read the script observed, "This is very funny; it must have been very funny to live during those times."

This wasn't my intention and I thought I had a responsibility to avoid this response. Since I never wanted to abandon the project, I decided to make a film with a very different tone. I knew that I wanted a harsher view of this period—and this is how I came up with the current film. But the cycle will continue with two more films that will focus on other aspects of Romanian society during this era. Since the rest of the project is so episodic, I've decided to make it an omnibus film. Various young Romanian directors will direct subsequent episodes.

Cineaste: Did the chronicle of the abortion in the current film come out of research?

Mungiu: No, it came from a desire to tell a story that had relevance for this period and great emotional intensity—and was also pertinent for my entire generation. I was born in 1968 and I'm part of a generation of Romanians who are now on earth because abortion was illegal at the time. I thought this was a subject that speaks to the plight of a lot of my contemporaries. It was a personal story that I was familiar with. After I met again with the girl who had told me stories about this era, I realized that it had the potential of becoming a film.

Cineaste: So a woman who had grown up during the end of the Ceausescu regime recounted the story to you?

Mungiu: Yes, I based it on a real story but only fictionalized the biographies and added some of the context. I tried to research some details to make sure I wasn't doing something nonsensical. But the basic story always remained the same.

Cineaste: Did the narrative equation always emphasize the passivity of the young woman needing the abortion contrasted with the energetic resourcefulness of her friend and helper?

Mungiu: This wasn't particularly apparent at the beginning of the process; it was something that evolved while I was writing the script. At the beginning I thought I was making a film about two girls. But I

eventually discovered that I had only one main character. Because of this, I made some changes and essentially left out all the scenes involving one of the characters since I realized that the protagonist who understands what's going on during this day should be the focus. I thought this was better for the story.

Cineaste: In some respects, the opposition of these characters is a metaphor for opposing options in a totalitarian society: remaining passive vs. the choice to resist.

Mungiu: It demonstrates that, although you might resist without solving anything, at least you had a reaction. It was important for me to show that some people were much more aware than others of what was going on at this time. Most people, though, just act from day to day and don't think about the consequences. I thought it was important to make this film to emphasize that there are still people today in Romania who act without thinking about the consequences. After being forced to have children during the Ceausescu years, there were about a million abortions in Romania after it was made legal—as if people didn't realize that there was another kind of contraception.

Cineaste: You've spoken about the decision to filter most of the narrative through Otilia's perspective. But it also seems important to emphasize how the camera maintains a distance from her narrative and seems to evoke the presence of state surveillance that was obviously a factor at that time.

Mungiu: If you watch the film carefully, you'll notice that, when she walks, for example, we only see her from the back. But I wasn't trying to make this sort of commentary conspicuous. When I was directing actors, I didn't tell them that certain gestures were symbolic or signified something specific. I was trying to keep the actors conscious of their roles but hoped that, when the film was finished, people would understand some aspects of Romanian society from the way the film was made. I hope the film invites discussion of this diffuse sort of oppression, the fear of always being watched and controlled. But I didn't want to make it too explicit.

Cineaste: And, in a similarly subtle way, you emphasize how class dis-

tinctions persisted under Communism.

Mungiu: Yes, to my surprise, a Bulgarian told me that he thought this was the best film he'd seen about social classes under Communism; the film speaks about the wide range of options available to those on top. One of my purposes with this film was to demonstrate that, although we were young and thought we weren't affected by propaganda, we were victims of the educational system. This sometimes came out during arguments; when we were angry our arguments sometimes reflected this propaganda. I think this comes out when Otilia is arguing with her boyfriend; she can't speak about her friend's abortion so the other conflicts become apparent. This is very strange since we usually never talked about these matters among ourselves. When this couple becomes aware of their parents' status, it's something that's come out of the propaganda and the educational system. People have heard that intellectuals are very important, even if they're not quite sure why.

Cineaste: It's reminiscent of what Milovan Djilas once wrote about the Yugoslavian "new class."

Mungiu: And this was eventually the class promoting capitalism in the post-Communist era. The former Communists became the engine of the new economy.

Cineaste: Of course, there were some peculiar aspects of Romanian Communism since it was the only Eastern bloc country to ban abortion. The Soviet Union promoted abortions.

Mungiu: And the Soviet Union promoted sex as a way of relieving social pressures. It was completely different in Romania. Even in Poland, despite the influence of the Catholic Church, the policy was different. This was something specifically Romanian. It's difficult to find a good explanation. But, according to my research, the causes stem from Ceausescu's motivations from 1966 on that were partially economic and partially propagandistic.

Cineaste: And tied to Ceausescu's cult of personality?

Mungiu: It was a way of saying that we have to boost the economy: to complete our plans in economics and agriculture we therefore have to increase the population. Important nations are big nations. We need

to build the new man, the new socialist man. Because of this reasoning, abortion was forbidden for much of the population. It was only permitted for women over forty-five. You'd get a medal for producing ten children.

Cineaste: This probably explains why Ceausescu's regime was considered as much fascist as Communist.

Mungiu: Yes, and it's important to explain this sort of thing. Because of the situation in Romania where childbearing was imposed on women, they weren't considering the most important aspect of abortion—the fact that it's your personal, moral choice. It's not about you or the system; it's an ethical choice that needs to be made. We never thought about this. We were just trying to get away with not getting caught by the authorities. The fact that we weren't aware of these ethical questions was the most horrible aspect of Communism.

Cineaste: The shot of the fetus (which is held for a considerable length of time) is probably the most controversial moment in the film. I assume you felt this shot was an essential component of the narrative, especially since it's an important element in Otilia's perspective on events.

Mungiu: I thought it was an important part of the story and it would have been an odd formal decision on my part as an author to avoid this shot. This was so much part of what was happening to her during this day. Since she spends the last thirty minutes of the film dealing with what she experiences in the bathroom, you can't really avoid showing the fetus. The shot is not long. People tell me that it's one minute, but it's only fourteen seconds or so—the length that was needed for her to deliver her lines. When I edited the film I realized this was part of the story and would have to remain.

Cineaste: Nevertheless, have some viewers or critics objected to this shot?

Mungiu: Well, something else is happening here. Romanians, including myself, are not familiar with the kind of imagery used by antiabortion organizations over here. I come from a country where abortion is not an issue anymore—in any sense. It's strange, but it's a very poor country experiencing many other problems. So the more economic problems you have, the less time you have to think about moral issues. You're just concerned with making a living.



The friendship of Otilia (Anamaria Marinca, left) and Gabita (Laura Vasiliu) is put to the test in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*.

Cineaste: Yes, I'm sure part of the reaction to the shot is connected to revulsion against the imagery used by antiabortion propagandists.

Mungiu: Yes, but what made me happy about the reaction to the film at festivals, and in the States, was that people realize that the film is just trying to tell a story. It's not taking sides. I hope the film will serve as a departure point for people to form their own opinions.

Cineaste: Wasn't there a controversy recently about the film being screened in French schools?

Mungiu: Yes, there was a huge protest by an association of filmmakers in France against the French minister of education's attempt to censor the film. At some point, they wanted to draw back from screening the film in French high schools. I won an award while in Cannes called "La Prix de L'Éducation nationale." My understanding was that the film wouldn't necessarily be shown in all of the schools but a documentary about the film would be shown and eventually the film itself would be screening in schools and DVDs made available. Apparently some French antiabortion organization protested. You can never tell with this film; in some countries, it is used as a tool against abortion! Finally, though, this organization gave up and it will be shown in French schools. Not only that, there's also the possibility that the same thing will be done in Romania. I think, in a way, it's even more important for young people in Romania to see the film.

Cineaste: I suppose the decision to employ "real time" in the film arose from your decision to follow the journey of one protagonist and her actions and thought processes.

Mungiu: Yes, this is also why I didn't use music, intrusive editing, or even close-ups if possible. I wanted to keep a proper distance from the subject and be honest with the story. I feel that, if you're honest but stay true to the story, the audience will also react more honestly than if I was constantly imposing my own point of view.

Cineaste: And you must have worked quite closely with your cinematographer, Oleg Mutu, to achieve this esthetic.

Mungiu: Well, we were colleagues in film school and we started working about thirteen years ago. We did more than ten films together as well as some commercials. It's easy to work with him since I've known him for such a long time. But since he isn't Romanian, and was born in Kishinev in

Moldova, I had to explain to him what I wanted as far as the realism of the film was concerned. With the interiors, I wanted to use as little artificial light as possible and I wanted to shoot at night for the exteriors. Historically speaking, there were no streetlights in Romania. So he was inventive enough to carry some lights on top of the cameras so we could understand what was happening to a character when we were following her for 200 meters during a night scene. I hate films when you can see a beam of light illuminating the characters. It wasn't like this at all; he did a tremendous job.

Cineaste: And he was also the camera operator.

Mungiu: Yes, and operating the camera for this film was a very physical job, very difficult. He climbed downstairs with this girl for the long shot in the hotel. To do the shot at the end of the film, we started in the street and we walked with the whole crew up to a block of flats carrying everything including the

sound equipment.

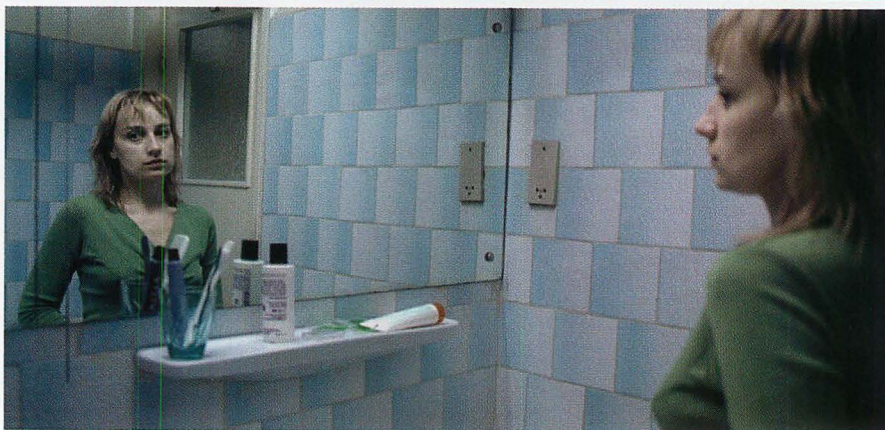
Cineaste: It seems reminiscent of the Dardenne brothers' technique.

Mungiu: Yes, I will have to see their films since many people have made this comparison. But *La Promesse* is the only one I've seen. I wanted to invite them to a screening, but they couldn't make it. I'm very curious to see if there's a stylistic similarity.

Cineaste: It's also interesting that there are several directors in Romania working in a naturalistic style. Of course, I noticed that you remarked in *Sight & Sound* that you didn't think there was a unified "group" of Romanian directors. Do you dislike the category now known as the "Romanian New Wave?"

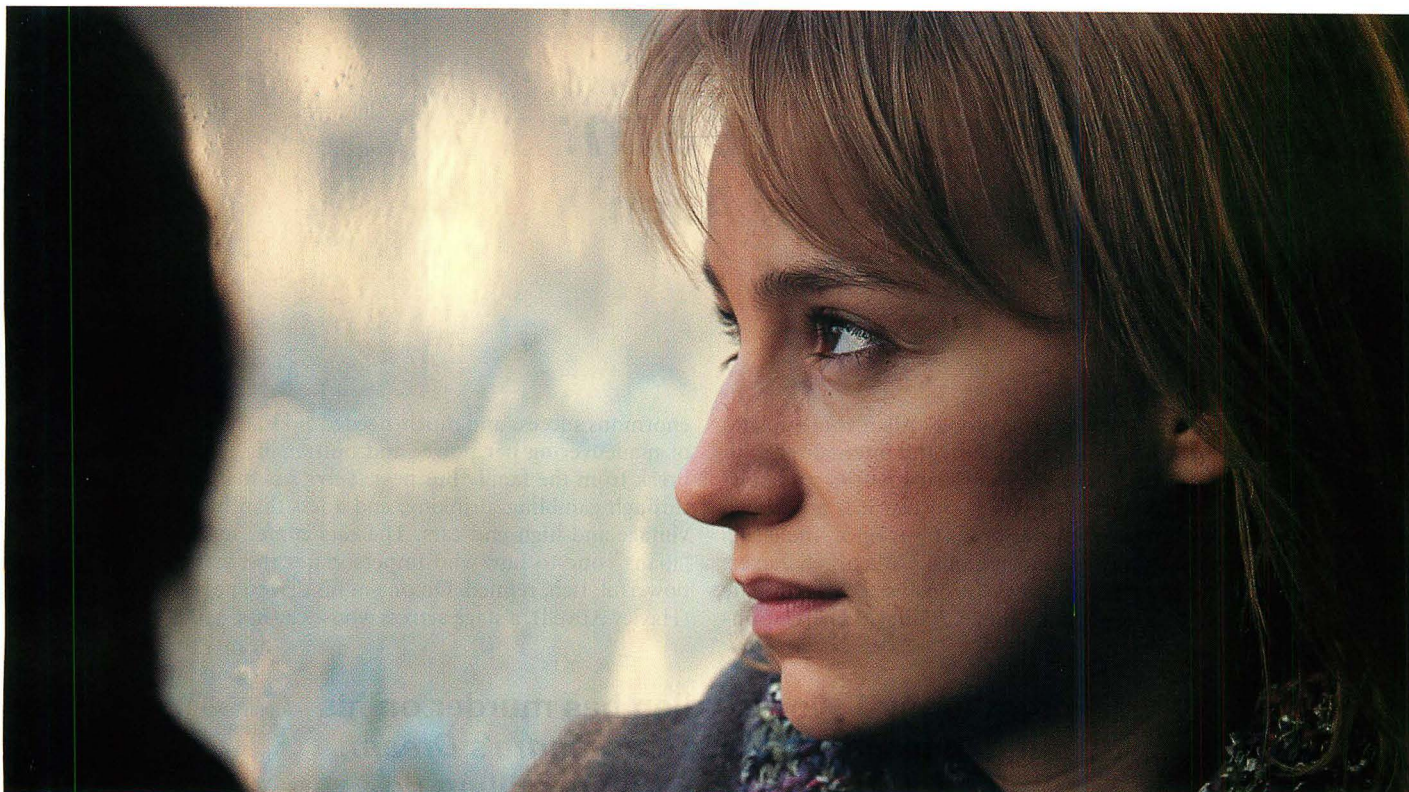
Mungiu: Well, the only thing that makes these directors a group is the fact that they all received recognition around the same time and are about the same age; there's a Romanian "wave," if you like, but not a Romanian "school." It's not as if we share an esthetic manifesto. Some of the films have similar traits. But if you watch my film next to films by Catalin Mitulescu, Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, they're all very different. I think this is one of the good things about this wave of filmmakers. They are quite diverse and don't necessarily view cinema in the same way. Some of the films share realism in common or a certain form of humor. One thing we all have in common is the fact that we are not only writer-directors, but also produce the films

"People realize that the film is just trying to tell a story. It's not taking sides. I hope the film will serve as a departure point for people to form their own opinions."



Top: Otilia spars furtively with her boyfriend (Alex Potocean).

Bottom: Otilia examines her ravaged face during an unpleasant birthday celebration.



A close-up of a determined Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) testifies to her courage and persistence in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*.

ourselves. So, within the limitations of our small budgets, we all have the freedom to make the films we see fit. Not one of us would ever make any comments regarding box-office potential—there is no box-office potential. There are only thirty-five movie theaters left in Romania.

Cineaste: *Are the Romanian films screened in theaters? Or is the situation similar to other countries where American product dominates.*

Mungiu: Even though Romanian films are screened, American movies make up eighty per cent of the market. But the situation is not good since Romanians don't go to see many films in theaters at all; they don't have theaters to see films. But now that I'm in a position to do something, I've organized a caravan to show films all over Romania. The results have been quite spectacular and I think we're proving a point. We've done our part; the films have done very well at festivals, and the people who have seen them in Romania like them. So maybe now we'll get someone to invest in exhibition.

Cineaste: *Although many people now see films on DVDs, it's a much different experience seeing them theatrically.*

Mungiu: Yes, just think about how this film was made. It was shot in widescreen and it has a lot of details placed in the background because I never wanted them to become the subject of the film.

Cineaste: *Yes, and this film is partially about the specific duration of events. So there's a real necessity to see it from beginning to end without interruption.*

Mungiu: Yes, it makes a big difference if you see the film theatrically and don't pause to get up to get a beer. But, during the last fifteen years, Romanians have gotten used to seeing films mostly on home video. But it's important to know if people want to see films in theaters because there's no point making films on film if they just want to watch DVDs.

Cineaste: *In scouting locations, did you attempt to find ones such as the hotel that had the feel of Romania during the last years of Communism?*

Mungiu: It wasn't easy. Even though the action of the film doesn't take place in Bucharest, it was possible for us to shoot exteriors there. I wanted to emphasize that this wasn't happening in Bucharest since abortion was a much more complicated issue in the provinces. The

possibilities were much more limited. But, given my small budget, I couldn't fly to distant locations and had to shoot in Bucharest.

There are two hotels in the film and I couldn't find a second appropriate hotel in Bucharest. You can find many socialist-looking buildings but not necessarily places where you're able to shoot because they have air conditioning, satellite dishes, and all of the windows have been changed. I finally found a second hotel about eighty kilometers from Bucharest. Even with the same hotel, I made a lot of changes. The room I chose for the negotiation scene didn't have the right walls but was at least quiet. There was a tram outside the first one and I only used direct sound. So I painted the walls of the room and covered one window and built a fake wall and took furniture from another room. So, even though I intervened and made changes to these "real locations," there is an aspect of filming in actual locations that helps the actors.

Cineaste: *And it was helpful that you received some support from the Hubert Bals Fund of the Rotterdam Film Festival?*

Mungiu: That support was not only helpful financially. It was even more helpful from a logistical viewpoint since this provided the initial confirmation that the screenplay was doable. I got very good feedback and reinforced my idea that this would be the first film in the cycle although I had written another screenplay previously. Furthermore, Rotterdam helped by having a screening before Cannes of a rough cut for sales agents and a very few critics. This was very helpful since it informed people that the film was ready for Cannes and was of interest.

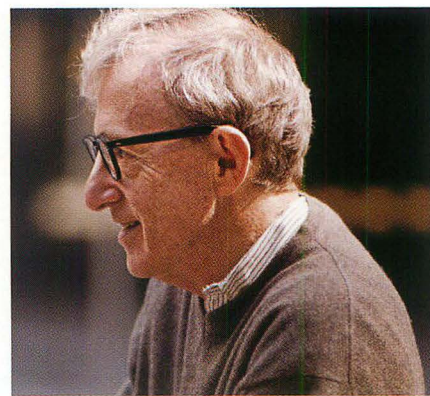
Cineaste: *So in conclusion, wouldn't you say that 4 Months shouldn't be reduced to being termed an "abortion film?"*

Mungiu: Yes, but it can be. In countries like Italy and Poland the abortion issue was much more important than the film. It was impossible to speak about anything else. But people who actually see the film never come out with the impression that they've seen a film about abortion. I am glad that, despite all of the expectations people have about the film before actually seeing it, it's a different experience when they actually see it. ■

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days is distributed by IFC First Take, 11 Penn Plaza, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10001, phone (646) 273-7214, www.ifcfilms.com.

Status and Morality in *Cassandra's Dream*: An Interview with Woody Allen

by Cynthia Lucia



In his latest film, *Cassandra's Dream*, Woody Allen contemplates the nature of status—how it is gained, lost, and internalized with consequences that cut to the very core of identity and self-esteem. This is not a new theme for Allen—in fact it is arguably a central theme infusing almost every one of his films since *Annie Hall* in 1977. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Allen's characters continually negotiate their perceived positions as they formulate dreams, desires, aspirations—and as they conduct their relationships. As his films work and rework this idea—whether in the context of comedy or drama, Allen invites us to ask whether sincerity of emotion or action is possible in a world driven by collective desires for material acquisition, approbation, and love, which itself is often clouded or misguided. “Can love and desire function, free from perceptions of status?” Allen seems to ask.

He most explicitly addresses this question and its ethical implications in *Manhattan* (1979), a film in which characters feel compelled to “trade up” or down in their relationships. Although the teenage Tracy (Mariel Hemingway) appears exempt from such motives in her relationship with Allen's Isaac Davis, some thirty years her senior, her final words are pivotal when she asserts that “not everybody gets corrupted—you need to have a little faith in people.” The sustained look of uncertainty, sadness, and perhaps ironic resignation these words evoke in Isaac encapsulates much of what Allen explores and expresses in his films to follow—so many of which are dedicated to testing out Tracy's thesis.

Though a less accomplished film than *Manhattan*, *Cassandra's Dream* is no exception. Set in London (and Allen's third film shot there), it tells the story of two working-class brothers, Ian (Ewan McGregor) and Terry (Colin Farrell), who long for a better life. The workaday world the brothers inhabit is defined by their father's (John Benfield) failing restaurant, a fact their mother (Claire Higgins) never ceases to mention, at first indirectly, through comparisons with her brother Howard (Tom Wilkinson)—a California-based plastic surgeon whose

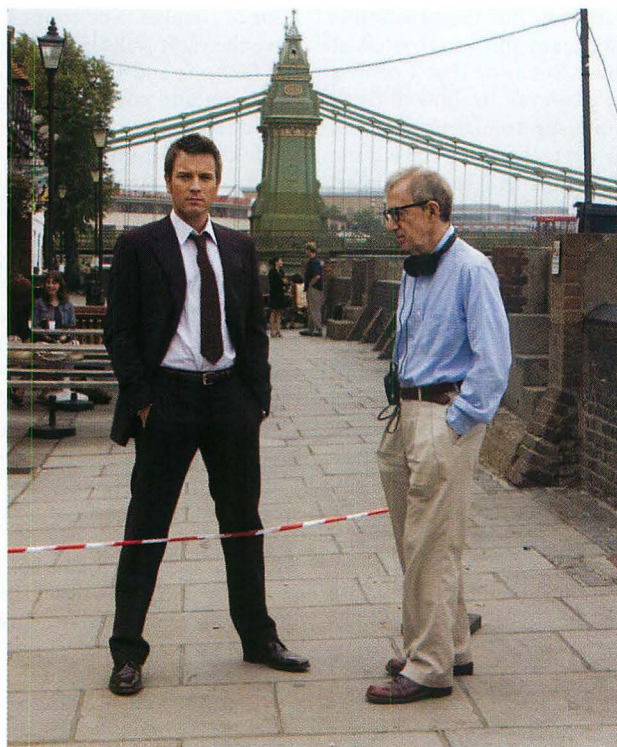
enormous success and much-needed aid to the family are her means of maneuvering her power and buttressing Ian's determination to break from the family business. Terry has managed a pseudoescape through gambling, drinking, and a less than inspiring job servicing vintage and high-end cars. The cars confer meager status when he “loans” one to Ian, who impersonates the man he'd like to be—powerful, rich, refined. On one of his drives, he rescues Angela Stark (Hayley Atwell), a stage actress whose car has stalled. Seduced by her beauty and her hip circle of London acquaintances, Ian convinces her that the car and the vague references to American real-estate investments are for real—an impression given further credence by the sailboat he and Terry have purchased with Terry's winnings at

the dog track. They name the boat “Cassandra's Dream” after the winning greyhound—the eponymous implications, of course, portending dire and fateful events, with signposts of warning characters refuse to acknowledge, just as the truthful predictions of the mythological Cassandra are ignored.

Enter Uncle Howard, who offers the money to make Ian's American dream come true and to pay the enormous gambling debt Terry has accrued. Howard asks a simple favor in return: Terry and Ian must “get rid of” his business partner who threatens to expose Howard's financial misconduct. Trading on family loyalty and largesse, Howard makes an offer that the more ambitious Ian cannot refuse, while Terry remains reluctant, even though, with loan sharks circling, he's got the most to lose. So far, these plot elements could be played for laughs, as they are in *Manhattan Murder Mystery* (1993), *Bullets over Broadway* (1994), and *Scoop* (2006).

But there is no mistaking the serious tone and intent in the opening strains of Philip Glass's musical score—one of the few original scores for Allen, who uses existing jazz recordings, primarily, to accompany his films. From the start, the minimalist circularity of the score telegraphs the claustrophobic and ominous atmosphere even when characters sail on calm and open waters. The score gives too

Forget funny—Woody Allen has murder on his mind in his latest work, *Cassandra's Dream*, about two brothers who are willing to do anything for a better life.



Woody Allen and Ewan McGregor on location in London during the shooting of *Cassandra's Dream*.



Family Plot: Uncle Howard (Tom Wilkinson, left) draws nephews Ian (Ewan McGregor) and Terry (Colin Farrell) into homicide in a key scene from Woody Allen's latest meditation on murder, *Cassandra's Dream*.

much away too early, draining potential nuance and ambiguity from the narrative and the visual frame. While *Cassandra's Dream* is most closely aligned in subject and tone with *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Match Point* (2005), the jazz interwoven with a Schubert string quartet in the former, and the scratchy Verdi arias performed by Caruso interwoven with modern Verdi recordings in the latter work to create a subtle, textured, and unpredictable counterpoint with narrative and image. It is not until Terry's anxieties heighten leading up to the murder and he slowly unravels following the murder, that the music begins to earn its place in the narrative—particularly as Ian contemplates the only “available” option—murdering his own brother who threatens all that Ian potentially will gain.

The ironic twists that follow tap into themes of fate, chance, expediency, and morality so masterfully expressed in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and later, with lesser success, in *Match Point*. We are thrown for a moment into the chaotic and incomprehensible—a powerful glimmer of what *Crimes and Misdemeanors* was able to more fully sustain and contemplate.

Although *Cassandra's Dream* is not the strongest or most compelling film in Allen's oeuvre, it nevertheless has its wonderfully astute, stylistically nuanced moments. The film is never better than when it sits us down at the family dinner table, the claustrophobic framing and *mise-en-scène* evoking a lived-in familiarity and carefully calibrated dynamic that dictates the roles and interactions as circumscribed by years of routine and “rehearsal.” And when Uncle Howard takes the family out to dinner, Allen captures the tiniest gesture and glance, speaking volumes about ambition, suppressed desires, insecurity, and false bravado.

Cineaste spoke with Allen by telephone the day before the film's New York release, touching upon, most significantly, his concern that in a world where crime so often goes unpunished, the morality of the individual is our only hope.—**Cynthia Lucia**

Cineaste: So many of your films are concerned with status—how characters gain or lose it—and the consequences on both sides of the equation. What draws you to that subject?

Woody Allen: One has various ambitions—they could be social ambitions, romantic ambitions, ambitions for material possessions—and status certainly involves all of that, and sometimes status in itself is desirable. In terms of the Greeks, themes of status put morality to the test to see just how far you'll go to achieve what it is that you want—the social climbing, the notoriety, the fame, the fortune. Whether it's *Macbeth* or some other work, it's a standard motivating factor.

Cineaste: Is it possible that the stories told in *Cassandra's Dream* and *Match Point* could be adapted to an American setting, or do you see the class and status issues as more particular to a British setting?

Allen: It's not at all connected to that—that's just a chance byproduct. I wrote *Match Point* originally about an upper-class family in the Hamptons. I made the switch to England where the social imperative gets magnified. The same is true of *Cassandra's Dream*. I wrote that and set it in England but I could have easily made it about two brothers living in Brooklyn, Queens, or Manhattan and an uncle with a proposition and with the same tragic events that occur, though status does get magnified in the more socially-conscious, class-conscious society of London.

Cineaste: As I watch *Cassandra's Dream* and think about *Match Point*, I'm struck by echoes of Patricia Highsmith, and to some extent of René Clément's adaptation of Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in *Purple Noon*. Did you consciously or perhaps unconsciously have Highsmith or Clément in mind when working on *Cassandra's Dream*?

Allen: I didn't. I'm really not an enjoyer of *Purple Noon*. And I'm not a fan of Highsmith's writing, though when she's been adapted by Hitchcock it's a different story. In this case it was just an idea that came to me because I had written a play about a family that was looking forward to their uncle coming to the house because they all

had favors they wanted to ask of him. In my play he doesn't have any favors he wants to give out. He comes with his girlfriend and one of the brothers gets involved with the girlfriend—it's a different kind of a story. But in this case what occurred to me was, what if the uncle had a favor to ask—a favor that brought up a strong moral issue, a crisis of conscience? That gave me an interesting idea for a movie that could be suspenseful and tense, with a crime plot that could be entertaining.

Cineaste: As you're speaking I'm thinking a little bit about *Uncle Charlie* in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*.

Allen: Well, that is one of my favorite Hitchcock movies. I wasn't thinking of that in relation to this situation, but it is a wonderful movie.

Cineaste: For the record, what's the name of your play about the visiting uncle?

Allen: Ahh... can you believe it? I wrote the play and can't remember the title... It's running in Paris, in French... it's called... *A Second-Hand Memory*.

Cineaste: In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point* the insularity provided by money and social class—as well as the sense of entitlement that goes along with it—seem largely in play when the main characters literally get away with murder. Is the very different outcome for the brothers in *Cassandra's Dream* largely a question of class—or one of conscience?

Allen: Let's not forget that in *Cassandra's Dream* the uncle gets off scot-free. It comes through the fact that I grew up in a society and a culture where those who preached to us said that crime didn't pay and that the bad guy always wound up trapped in the end and the good guy triumphed. And I think, yes, life would be wonderful if it was that way, but it was clear to me that life was not that way. So I always felt that, barring a heaven and a hell—a religious solution, which I did not believe in—and barring the fact that the bad guy

does not always get caught, the only thing you have is your own sense of morality. If it doesn't bother you to commit a crime, then it doesn't bother you. And if you get away with it, you get away with it. It's not like a fairy tale; there is no penalty.

Every day we see crimes ranging from sleazy little ones in the street like drug deals, to white-collar crimes and governmental crimes on the national level. And people get away with it. There are some people in the government, some people in the streets—wherever—who have consciences and that's the only thing that saves them, but some do not. I was interested in those stories—and the stories mostly of those who do not because they have more tension, more conflict, and a more intellectual argument about morality.

Cineaste: You've said that *Cassandra's Dream* is about fate. How does that theme figure into the visual design of the film?

Allen: I thought the film should be shot naturalistically and that things should unfold in a simple narrative. It was not the kind of film that should have any stylization—it shouldn't have any dream sequences in it; it should be a naturalistic evolution of that particular idea.

Cineaste: It's interesting, though, because the Philip Glass musical score seems to add a layer of stylization that isn't typically present—on a musical level—in your films. How do you feel the score works? Is this the only film in which you've used an original score?

Allen: No, I've done a few. Out of the thirty-some films I've made, a few films—maybe two, three, or four—have had original scores. But overwhelmingly I've not used original scores. In this one, I couldn't think of what to do, and then the idea of Philip Glass came up. I called him and he was very interested. I wanted something that complemented the tragedy of the story. He came in—and, of course, his music is so heavy, so ominous... he's a genius. He came in with an enormously ominous heavy piece of music, and I said, "My God, this so ominous and peculiar—giving the audience the whole



Allen says *Cassandra's Dream* puts "morality to the test" as the upwardly mobile Ian and Terry lust after the good life in London.

content of the story, and he said, 'Oh no, that's the love theme when he meets the girl. I haven't put the ominous part in yet.' That's definitive about where he was going with the music, and we managed to get a very good score.

Cineaste: I guess so, but for me it adds a layer of stylization that, depending on how you look at it, works to either contradict or complement the naturalism of the film's visual style.

Allen: I feel the film is shot naturalistically and the scoring was natural scoring; it was done just to complement the action of the movie. This was not a stylized score as in Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette*, in which she used contemporary music. Her idea was very inspired and risky but quite brilliant. In *Cassandra's Dream* I didn't want to do this; I wanted to do a score that complemented what was going on in the movie to keep it a natural narrative movie.

Cineaste: You've said that you tend to use the "master shot" out of laziness because it helps you avoid the necessity of cutting and doing many more takes. Yet, in shots like the one in which Ian and Terry discuss Uncle Howard's proposition, they move, ironically, from darkness into light as they emerge from under a bridge. It's a beautifully composed shot that makes palpable the very concept of movement on a psychological and moral level. It seems a very complex choreography of camera and character movement is at play.

Allen: You figure out the location and the lighting to complement the theme and the effect of the scene that you want. When I was saying "lazy," I actually meant it. For example, there is a long scene with the brothers and the uncle set under a tree. Now that was a very long scene if you look at the script—it's many pages of dialog. Somebody else—and very effectively, as well—could have shot the uncle, and Colin [Farrell] and then Ewan [McGregor], then over the shoulder of Ewan and then over the shoulder of Colin, all different combinations. They could have worked on that thing for two days. I didn't; I started the camera once, and dollied around the trees and filmed seven pages of the scene before I was forced to get into some cutting. And I do that out of laziness because I don't have the patience to make the actors do it or to do it myself—shooting the scene, and then shooting the same material again, and then shooting the same material again on the other actor and shooting it again over-the-shoulder and shooting it again, over and over, so that you're constantly droning on doing the same scene over and over all day. I can't do that.

I choreograph so I can get everything in early in the day and at, say, two in the afternoon, we'll shoot. We cover seven pages in one shot and maybe the first time they screw it up, but by the second take or



Light and darkness intertwine in *Cassandra's Dream*, shot by cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond.

"Everyday we see crimes ranging from sleazy little ones in the street like drug deals, to white collar crimes and governmental crimes on the national level. And people get away with it."

surroundings and in relationship to each other in a very powerful way. Another group of scenes I like very much in this movie are the family dinner scenes, which are shot in much the same way. I admire the way you handle the family dynamic—particularly in the first dinner scene, in which we see how tired everyone is of hearing the mother go on and on about Uncle Howard and his success. In a later dinner scene, she seems truly happy with her son's success and doesn't even mention Howard, until one of the sons brings the subject up—almost as if obeying a fateful family ritual—'we can't have a meal without raising the subject of Howard and

without the conflict that will then ensue.' I thought this was so insightful and true to family interactions. How did you perceive and shape the family dynamic?

Allen: The mother idolized her brother beyond all reality. He spent very little time with the family, though he helped them out financially, which was an easy way to help someone out. He didn't give time but he gave money. He didn't come back and visit very often, but when he did, he would drop in and see that they were taken care of. The father couldn't stand him because the mother was constantly throwing him up as an example of someone who made it and had money and was on the ball and had success, and the father was a struggling guy with a restaurant who was dependent on his wife's brother to give them a vacation or buy them a down payment on the house or help with the business—so the father was sick of hearing about him all the time. The two boys idolized him because the mother did, and he was, indeed, successful. He was generous with the boys.

Cineaste: I know we have to end now, so I'd like to thank you not only for your time but also on a more personal note. Even though I always find it a little naïve when I hear people say that this or that movie "changed my life," I have to admit that when I first saw Annie Hall in 1977, a year after having graduated from college, it gave me the overwhelming impetus to do what I had always wanted to do—move to New York. I must tell you that I've been grateful to you ever since.

Allen: So, I did some good, finally!

the third take, they've got, and I get the whole scene. The actors appreciate it; they don't have to do it endlessly. They can sink their teeth into some acting for seven pages instead of doing one line before a cut—that's not acting. It's worked out very well for me, but the convenience of it is that I'm lazy.

Cineaste: It works very well by allowing us to see the characters in the context of their

Cassandra's Dream is distributed by The Weinstein Company, 345 Hudson Street, 13th Floor, New York, New York 10014, www.weinsteinco.com.

Still Lives in Times of Change:

An Interview with Jia Zhangke

by Jared Rapfogel



In only a decade of activity as a feature filmmaker, and at the relatively tender age of thirty-seven, Jia Zhangke has rapidly distinguished himself as one of contemporary cinema's most indispensable voices. He has done so not only by demonstrating his visual and stylistic mastery, but also by staking out a thematic terrain of great urgency and relevance. In an era in which, many argue, China is destined to supplant the United States as the world's most significant economic force, Jia is perhaps the filmmaker most dedicated to exploring the human cost of this transformation, to portraying individuals caught up in the tidal waves of modernization and globalization which are affecting people's lives all over the globe, but perhaps nowhere so cataclysmically as in Asia.

Jia's first film was the resolutely small-scale, if remarkably assured, *Xiao Wu* (Pickpocket, 1997), a portrait of a hapless young thief floundering in a society increasingly dominated by criminals and "businessmen" of a vastly more sophisticated and powerful stripe. This impressive debut, with its distinctive mixture of grim neorealist reportage, understated compassion, and surprising glimpses of humor, nevertheless hardly prepared critics for the supreme accomplishment of Jia's follow-up, the monumental *Platform* (2000), appropriately released at the dawn of the new millennium. *Platform*, a film of sublime patience, great formal rigor, and profound thematic ambition, surveys the dramatic transformations in Chinese society and culture during the key decade of the 1980s, as the increasingly market-driven economy rapidly sweeps away the old order. *Platform* represents the most radical manifestation of Jia's wide-angle perspective, the sweeping, communally-focused nature of his vision, but it also demonstrates his genius for grounding this vision in a unifying image, in this case a musical group which begins life as the Fenyang Peasant Culture Group, and emerges from the turbulent events of the decade as the All Star Rock and Breakdance Electronic Band. It's through the prism of this group, a small and ostensibly banal piece of the cultural landscape, that Jia conveys the greater

changes transforming Chinese society as a whole.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in Jia's subsequent career has been eluding the shadow cast by the towering *Platform*. *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), though by no means a failure, felt like a sideways step, a portrait of teenage alienation, aimlessness, and emptiness that could not quite escape a nagging sense of familiarity, thanks not only to Jia's own *Xiao Wu*, but to other thematically-related films by Edward Yang (*A Brighter Summer Day*), Hou Hsiao-hsien (*Goodbye South, Goodbye* and *Millennium Mambo*), and Tsai Ming-liang (*Rebels of the Neon God*). *The World* (2004) suggested a way forward, thanks to the presence of a character from the West (a Russian woman befriended by the protagonist) and the new dynamic that arose from this meeting of disparate cultures, but above all by the vivid, uncanny central symbol

Jia chose to carry the new film, and through which he was able to invest his customary themes with a new element of strangeness: a suburban Beijing theme park populated by structures representing, in miniature, many of the

world's best-known buildings, from the Eiffel Tower and Taj Mahal, to the Pyramids of Egypt and (pointedly) the World Trade Center.

The central image of Jia's most recent fictional feature, *Still Life* (2006), is even more powerful, tragic, and strange. The backdrop of *Still Life* is the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the immense civil works project, which ultimately will result in the world's largest hydroelectric power station, but at a human cost including the destruction by flooding of millennia-old settlements and sites, potentially grave

environmental pollution, and above all the relocation of over a million-and-a-half people. As in *Platform*, Jia grapples here with social and cultural forces of a vast scale by focusing on a handful of those affected—grains of sand in a sandstorm. In this case, the foreground is inhabited by two protagonists, whose stories mirror each other but never intersect—a middle-aged miner, Sanming, and Shen Hong, a more affluent nurse, both of whom travel to the soon-to-be submerged town of Fengjie in search of estranged spouses (and of long-lost memories).

Whether in fiction feature or documentary format, Jia Zhangke's films take stock of the transformation of contemporary China.



Changing with the times, the Fenyang Peasant Culture Group becomes The All Star Rock and Breakdance Electronic Band in Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000).

But what they find instead is a region being emptied of the past, readied for oblivion, its communities uprooted, torn asunder, and in chaos.

In *Still Life*, Jia has found just the sort of image, surreal and expressionistic yet incontrovertibly real, that he was striving for in *The World*. The flooding of Fengjie is at once a document of an historical phenomenon, a symbol for the brutality of change in twenty-first century China, and a metaphor for the emotional and psychological effects of these changes on people like Sanming and Shen Hong. A filmmaker as attuned to the big picture—the large-scale forces of historical change—as he is to the individual experiences of his characters, Jia has struck an exquisite balance between the two in *Still Life*, his greatest film since *Platform*. And this balance extends to the tone of the film, sorrowful and tragic, yet unexpectedly illuminated by a note of promise and possibility. There are several key moments here, several grace notes, in which Jia takes the film into the realm of the mysterious, the fantastic, even the supernatural—*Still Life* finds Jia giving his imagination a freer reign than in the past, allowing himself recourse to the lyrical and the poetic, which may, in and of itself, constitute a sign of hopefulness.

More recently, Jia has pursued a separate (but closely-related) direction in his work, as he has turned to documentary filmmaking, first in *Still Life*'s companion piece, *Dong* (2006), a portrait of an artist painting in the Three Gorges area; and now in his most accomplished nonfiction film so far, *Useless* (2007), a meditation on clothing design and manufacture. Conceived as a portrait of the avant-garde fashion designer Ma Ke, whose work critiques mass manufacture, the film ultimately grew into a three-part essay, with sections on the factory workers who assemble the mass-market clothes Ma Ke designs alongside her less conventional work, and on the small-town tailors who constitute a dying breed. While the film's perspective is frustratingly difficult to gauge—Jia seems to regard Ma Ke with uncritical admiration, despite the paradox of a critique of mass manufacture that's addressed not to workers

or even the middle class, but to wealthy Parisian fashion-show devotees—the three-part structure allows Jia to explore the processes of modernization, to compare, in typically subtle fashion, the differences between various modes of labor, and to elaborate on his central theme, the impact of social and economic upheaval on the lives of individuals.

Cineaste spoke to Jia, via translator, during the New York Film Festival this past October, where *Useless* was enjoying its United States premiere. —Jared Rapfogel



Sanming (Han Sanming, above right) and Shen Hong (Zhao Tao, below) conduct separate searches for their lost spouses in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*.

Cineaste: Your films almost always depict people struggling with or becoming overwhelmed by the forces of history, and fighting to form small-scale human relationships. Do you see this as a dynamic that's particularly common today, either specifically in China, or more generally in this stage of history?

Jia Zhangke: I think that this situation is not limited to China but that it happens all over the world. But I guess it's especially true in China right now because it's at a juncture of change, dramatic change. I mean, it's happened before, in postwar Japan, or in Taiwan after the communists left. But at this point in China there's so much change occurring, and there are these forces that are sometimes beyond the control of the people.

Cineaste: Is this a theme that you've consciously been trying to address from the very beginning, or has it emerged only gradually?

Jia: It was actually unconscious. As I was making *Platform*, I didn't realize that I was in fact exploring this relationship.

It was more that I was trying to recollect what happened during the Eighties, during my youth, but as I was making it I became more conscious of these changes. And it became even clearer to me, when I was making *Still Life*, that I wanted to explore this relationship and clarify what was going on in China right now.

Cineaste: That makes a lot of sense, because one of the interesting things that I feel has happened in your career is that with each film the theme has been refined. And in particular you've found remarkable



Top to bottom: Workers in a clothing factory in *Useless*; performers at the Beijing theme park in *The World*; two protagonists in *Platform*.

images to express it, such as the theme park in *The World*, and now in *Still Life*, a world literally being submerged, the forces of change physically obliterating the past.

Jia: In *The World*, I was trying to address the rapid change transforming China—it seems that China is opening up and that there's a promise of a new life, of new technologies, but actually this economic development is causing people to become even lonelier and more alienated. It's this contradiction that I'm trying to explore: with more openness and more economic development, there's actually more alienation among the people.

When I was making *Still Life*, I realized that China's ongoing open economic policy has reached its fruition—the allocation of resources is complete. But the reality is that people don't realize how much disruption there has been of the past and of history. And people in China have to realize that they need to know how to proceed, to continue to lead their lives. *Still Life* is actually about making choices, especially with regard to the two protagonists, choices they have to make so they can become freer.

Cineaste: Your new film, *Useless*, is nonfiction. There appears to be a lot of overlap between your fiction and nonfiction films in terms of your method: there are nonprofessional actors in both, and the visual style is similar. I'm curious if the processes of making each type of film are at all alike.

Jia: A lot of people say that my narrative films are like documentaries and my documentaries are like narrative films, but I feel that both genres have many possibilities for seeking truth. For me the main difference is that in my narrative films the subject matter is something I've observed for a long time, it's something that I'm familiar with, so I'm using the narrative form to tease out the whole story. But in the documentaries, the subject matter is something that I'm curious about, whether it's an artist or an industry, so the idea is to use the documentary to discover more about this topic, to satisfy my curiosity and expand my horizons.

In the documentaries, I'm trying to capture the natural state of life, of the people. But in the narrative films, I feel that there is an inherent drama in everyday life. I mean, it's not that people are acting out—it's just that there's this quality of drama and dramatic atmosphere, and I'm trying to capture that in my narrative films.

Cineaste: I'm curious also about the structure of *Useless*, which begins at the factory, and then focuses on the fashion designer Ma Ke, before ending with the rural tailors. How did you settle on this structure?

Jia: I didn't actually start out intending to have three different segments. The primary focus was on the fashion designer, Ma Ke, and it was actually through my interaction with her that I realized that there's more to fashion. She's trying to rebel against mass production, the assembly line—she's more interested in hand stitching and in artisanal esthetics. And there's also this sense of memory and emotional involvement in her designs. So that led me to make the segment about mass production in the factory, and the final segment with the rural tailors. In the tailor segment, there's a sense of involvement, of personal relationships—even though that may disappear soon, it's still very much alive right now.

It's through the lens of fashion that I can look at the different aspects and segments of society in China. I'm always trying through my movies to look at different living conditions. They usually just focus on one milieu, but in this one we observe life in Paris, which is a developed city, and in Guangzhou, which is a developing city, and finally Shanxi, which is a rural, underdeveloped area. So I'm trying to look at the limitations of these different living conditions, but also to observe what's going on right now.

Cineaste: I felt a contradiction between the protest Ma Ke is formulating through her work and the fact that it's being presented in Paris to a very wealthy, cultured crowd, and I couldn't tell if that contradiction was being highlighted in the film or not.

Jia: Ma Ke already has a successful commercial label, Exception, and that affords her the freedom to make *Useless*, which is more akin to art than fashion, which is a contradiction in itself. *Useless*, her more hand-stitched production, reflects a philosophy and a thinking about modern China. The show in Paris is actually the medium for

her to bring across that thinking, so in that sense, the contradiction is resolved—it's through that medium of exhibition that she's able to communicate her philosophy.

Cineaste: *Given that Still Life is set in a world that's crumbling away into nothingness, the tone of the film is surprisingly balanced between sadness and something more affirmative. There are these several moments of grace and beauty: the building magically launching into the sky, the bridge becoming illuminated, the tightrope walker at the very end. I'm curious about how, in a film that seems like it could easily have been your grimmest and most tragic, you find room for these moments of mystery and possibility.*

Jia: When I was making *Still Life*, what I first saw was a site of destruction, a two-thousand-year-old city that was destroyed in two years, leaving a sense of void and emptiness. But at the same time, the people are still going about their daily lives—which is evidence of a strong life force. So there's a sense of contradiction between destruction and an ongoing urge to live.

Of course there's a great sadness here: a two-thousand-year-old memory has just been erased, there's a sense of loss. But this also provoked my imagination—it led me to think about what is going to happen next, about the future. So I imagined a UFO that flies away...

Cineaste: *Why did you decide to focus on two parallel stories? They play off each other in very interesting ways, but what was your motivation here?*

Jia: The two distinct stories don't interact at all, but both occur in the same place, the same site, so what I'm trying to tease out is the complexity of human relationships. There's a constant reality that everyone in China faces now, where everyone is removed from their communities under the Communist system.

In China there's a cultural tradition that men and women are considered the yin and yang of the culture—they form the basic make-up of society. The movie is about destruction, about a site of destruction, but it's also about a new beginning, so it made me think about having these yin and yang elements in the make-up of this new beginning.

Cineaste: *There's also an interesting class difference between them. Did you want to show that this is not simply something that's inflicted on the working class?*

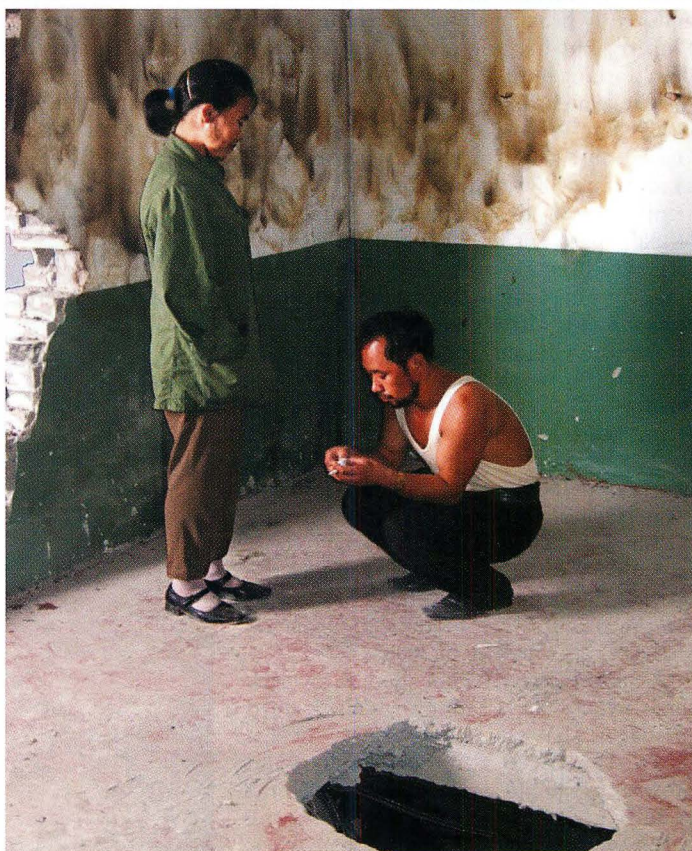
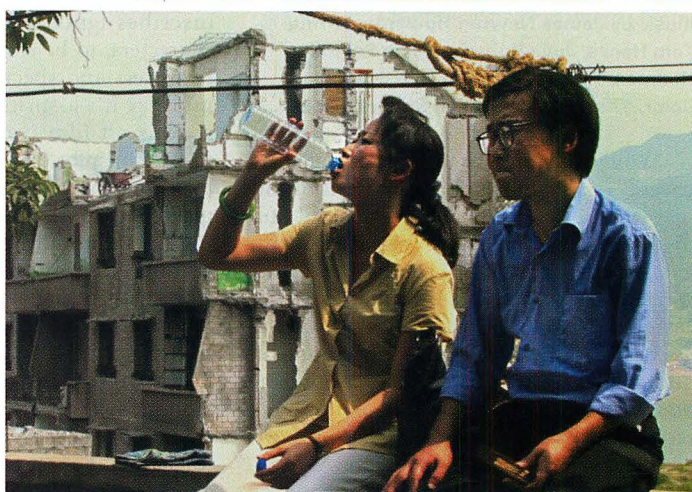
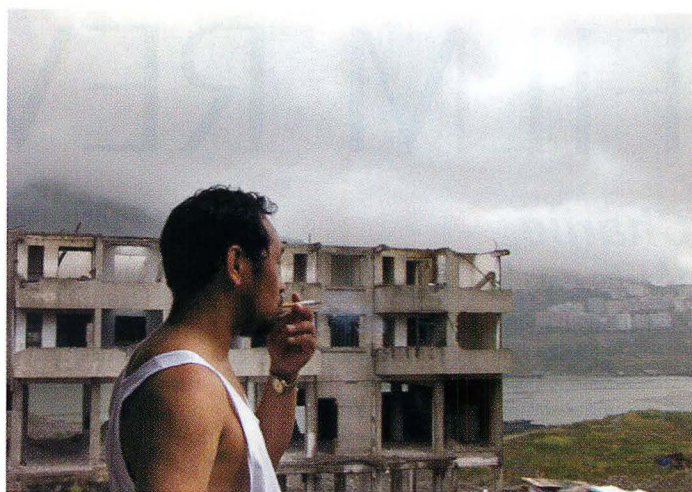
Jia: What I want is to bring out the complexity at play. If I were to focus solely on Sanming, the male character, I would be portraying only one class. But even though they're from different classes, their experiences are still quite similar. Before China opened up, there was this idea that everyone was equal under the Communist system, but with the economic changes that are occurring there's a widening of the gap between the two, between the different classes.

Cineaste: *This is also the first of your films that isn't primarily focused on youthful characters. Your protagonists here are not only older but are haunted by memories and by the past. Why this departure? Is this something you decided consciously you wanted to do, or is it a reflection of your own growing older?*

Jia: It's not really because I'm growing older, but because I'm realizing that, after all this opening and economic change, China has reached a stage where it can see the results of all these transformations. Those who are middle-aged have been through all this, and what they're facing right now are the consequences of what happened before.

The two protagonists are searching for their respective spouses, they're trying to solve their present problems, but in fact they're trying to solve problems from the past—it's because of the past that they find themselves in their present situation. In the same way, I feel that the problems that China faces right now are a result of its history, its past, and those who are middle-aged have gone through that whole process. I realized during the making of *Still Life* that for China to move forward, it has to reckon with the problems of the past. ■

Still Life is distributed by New Yorker Films, 21 West 38th Street, 14th Floor, New York, NY 10018, phone (212) 645-4600, www.newyorkerfilms.com.



In *Still Life*, Sanming and Shen Hong's stories are set against a backdrop of destruction and displacement from the Three Gorges Dam Project.

FILM REVIEWS

Charlie Wilson's War

Produced by Gary Goetzman and Tom Hanks; directed by Mike Nichols; screenplay by Aaron Sorkin, based on the book by George Crile; cinematography by Stephen Goldblatt; production design by Victor Kempster; costumes by Albert Wolsky; edited by John Bloom and Antonia Van Drimmelen; original music by James Newton Howard; starring Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams and Ned Beatty. Color, 97 mins. A Universal Studios release.

"You'll definitely want to stand up and cheer," reads a blurb line from a monthly magazine reviewer quoted in Universal Studios' full-page Sunday newspaper ad for *Charlie Wilson's War*. "Definitely" is the weasel word in this sentence, as if the reviewer needed an extraneous adverb to overcome some lingering doubt about his quotable effusion. His conscious mind no doubt convinced him it was a good thing to recommend cheering a movie that purported to tell how the good old U.S. of A. flummoxed the Russian military in Afghanistan and swiftly brought down the entire Soviet Empire. But his unconscious must have been warning him, 'Is it okay to stand up for the guys who brought us 9/11?'

Charlie Wilson's War, claiming to be "based on a true story," is a weasel film, evading and obfuscating the fundamental significance of its account, as a number of leftist experts on the CIA and the Middle East have been quick to proclaim. The best source on the facts is the author Chalmers Johnson, who brought into popular discourse the CIA jargon term "blowback," meaning adverse "unintended consequences" of covert actions, as in arming and training the Afghan mujaheddin to defeat the Soviets also brought about the creation of Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks. Johnson takes pride of place not only by dissecting the film's flaws but also having taken to task, in a 2003 *Los Angeles Times* review, the movie's nonfiction source book, also titled *Charlie Wilson's War*, by the CBS producer George Crile, who died in 2006.

Charlie Wilson's War is also a throwback film—when's the last time anybody deigned to suggest that you stand up and cheer a movie? It harks back to a particular strand of American political narrative, in which the rogues and outcasts, rather than the entrenched straitlaced Establishment types, are the true unheralded heroes of national victory and progress. Under the direction of

Mike Nichols and with a screenplay by Aaron Sorkin, it offers a tincture of the swashbuckler genre—you could imagine Errol Flynn in the lead role—and a slight aura of a Preston Sturges comedy. Nichols and Sorkin are both masters of patriotic satire, the kind that has a little fun with the clichés of recent American history but ultimately offers comfort and congratulation rather than serious challenge to them.

Fundamentally, as well, it's a film that inscribes ignorance—of a number of its characters, to be sure, but even more of its reviewers and spectators. At ninety-seven minutes it's a sprint compared to today's serious art film two-plus hours standard, filled with plot turns and location changes that leave the viewer barely keeping up. As a playwright, Sorkin knows the value of writing lines that go unheard in the midst of action, and Nichols abets the screenplay with swift cutting on movement, none more notorious than a cut, late in the film, from burning parts of a Soviet helicopter crashing in an Afghan village to a rear view of a woman's calves striding down a congressional corridor. And have I mentioned an unabashed appeal to male voyeurs through ample views of female cleavage? The result is a film that makes clear its dominant storyline while a considerable amount of controversial political detail gets lost in the romp and the rush, beyond the ken of most spectators other than those indefatigable left critics.

The film's patriotic bona fides are established with the opening title in red, white, and blue, and a quick cut to a huge American flag as backdrop to a CIA ceremony in which Congressman Charlie Wilson of Texas is to receive an unprecedented honor, and standing ovation, as a civilian Honored Colleague to the agency's clandestine service. The banner "Charlie Did It" hangs on the opposite wall, and what Charlie Wilson accomplished, according to his award, was nothing less than "the defeat and break-up of the Soviet Empire."

The film's Charlie Wilson, as portrayed by Tom Hanks, is of course based on an actual person, as are the other principal characters and many of the minor ones. "I like chasing women and drinking whiskey," the Wilson character later defines himself, and from the solemn ceremony *Charlie Wilson's War* cuts back in time nearly a decade to 1980, finding Charlie naked in a Las Vegas hot tub with an unclothed businessman and three nude women, two of whom are busily snorting cocaine. This episode will later cause Charlie potential legal trouble, barely, so to speak, avoided, but in the moment he is most interested in watching Dan Rather on TV reporting on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As a member of a congressional committee that approves "black appropriations" for the CIA—secret sums that require no accounting—he's concerned with how effectively "covert ops" was supporting the Afghan resistance.



Congressman Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks) and CIA agent Gust Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman) meet for the first time in Mike Nichols's *Charlie Wilson's War*.

Back in Washington, Charlie's office is staffed—with the exception of his admiring, conservatively dressed administrative assistant Bonnie Bach (Amy Adams)—by babes with plunging necklines. In Crile's book, they're called "Charlie's Angels;" when Charlie needs their attention, he hollers, "Jailbait!" Charlie's motto is, "You can teach 'em to type, you can't teach 'em to grow tits." Charlie sets about to double the CIA's five-million-dollar covert ops budget for Afghanistan, and they hear about it at Langley. In a scene of angry confrontation with his boss, a Greek-American agent, Gust Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman), gets the assignment to check out Charlie. Gust has a huge chip on his shoulder against "cake eaters," CIA bluebloods who look down on and doubt the loyalty of first- and second-generation Americans. With all the profanity and breaking of glass, spectators may well miss Gust's boast of his fifteen-year assignment to Greece, that "Papandreou wins the election if I don't help the junta put him in jail," a reference to CIA connivance with the Greek military dictatorship.

Before Charlie and Gust begin their slightly comical teamwork, a third figure enters the picture, a wealthy ultraright-wing Houston socialite, Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts), whose anticommunist zeal has earned her the post of Pakistan's Honorary Consul in Houston and close ties to the country's President Zia (Om Puri). After bedding Charlie, Joanne sends him off to Pakistan to meet Zia and get dressed down for his ignorance of the actual situation in Afghanistan, and the millions of refugees flooding into Pakistan's Northwest provinces. After being told by Zia of his character flaws, Charlie mutters—another political line that may pass by spectators—his resentment of being so criticized "by a man who hanged his predecessor in a military coup," a reference to the murder of the overthrown President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (father of the recently assassinated Benazir Bhutto). Zia sends Charlie to the Northwest frontier to visit refugee camps, hear tales of Soviet atrocities, and witness children with blown-off limbs. "This is the front of the Cold War," Charlie says, and goes back to raise millions more for CIA covert action (ultimately the figure was to reach a billion dollars, half from the U.S., half from the Saudis).

Providing clandestine arms for the mujaheddin takes Charlie and Gust to Jerusalem and Cairo, where they can acquire Soviet weapons that will look as if they had been captured, thus not directly implicating the U.S. The film's sole reference as to who the arms are going to is also something easily missed: at a CIA briefing, mention is made of Ahmad Shah Massoud, a Tajik warlord from northern Afghanistan, thus, according to left critics, avoiding naming the largess to Pashtun warriors later associated with the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden (Crile's book states that the greatest U.S. support went to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whom the CIA



Anticommunist Houston socialite Joanne Herring (Julia Roberts) helps start *Charlie Wilson's War*.

attempted to assassinate after 9/11). The mujaheddin get their antitank weapons and Stinger missiles. In another throwback scene, reminiscent of World War II movies showing Japanese or German aviators in their cockpits, Soviet helicopter pilots are seen nonchalantly talking about women in the moments before the first Stingers strike. Soon a montage of crashing aircraft and burning tanks is accompanied by graphics recounting Soviet losses in helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. The graphic "April 14, 1988"—a little more than eight years to the date since Charlie Wilson in the buff watched a turbaned Dan Rather on TV—heralds stock footage of Soviet troops pulling out of Afghanistan. "There's never been anything like it," Charlie exults.

A triumphal tone hailing America's Cold War victory dominates the film—"Stand up and Cheer"—but it was surely not possible for the filmmakers simply to stop time in 1989. Late in the game, Sorkin's script begins to drop subtle hints. Objecting to Joanne's invocation of God in support of her anticommunism, Charlie warns, "Sooner or later God is going to be on both sides." A key scene comes during a celebratory party, as Charlie and Gust step out on a terrace to talk alone. Signifying that what he has to say is serious, Gust takes away Charlie's drink and pours the contents into a potted plant. Don't count on a happy ending, Gust warns. He tells Charlie, "The crazies have started rolling into Kandahar like it's a fucking bathtub drain." Charlie discovers that his Northern liberal colleagues have no interest in voting money for postwar reconstruction. "Nobody gives a shit about a school in Pakistan," says one. "Afghanistan,"

Charlie frustratingly corrects him. As the film returns to its opening sequence—the CIA award ceremony, with its hangar-size American flag and "Charlie Did It" banner, Bonnie's adoring gaze, Joanne's blown kiss, Gust's approving glint, the standing ovation—its final image is a big close-up of Charlie's face at the podium, a Kuleshov Effect moment in which the spectator can read whatever the preceding story has signaled—pride and victory, or something more complicated, perhaps ambivalence or even worry behind the eyes. From this visage, it fades to black, followed by two graphic title cards, drawing on a quotation from Charlie Wilson on the final page of Crile's book: "These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world." On the last card: "And then we fucked up the endgame."

What do spectators make of this ending? If they're no more alert than most mainstream reviewers, they're likely to give it short shrift. Perhaps weary of the Iraq quagmire and the downbeat films the current war has spawned, most critics—with one or two honorable exceptions—have greeted *Charlie Wilson's War* with something like relief, finding it, indeed, a throwback film, funny and sexy and sophisticated the way they used to make them. It's an insufficient but perhaps understandable reaction in a season not only of dour reality but also of nearly every major film suffused with violence, death, and suffering.

Political satire utilizes certain formal constraints—for example, characterization is usually one-dimensional and stereotyped, the better to highlight character types and the predictability of their behavior. *Charlie Wilson's War* does follow this convention, and as a result Tom Hanks and Julia Roberts supply their star power and little else to their lead roles, which are in any case scripted without depth and with no more than a brittle, surface subtlety. Gust's class and ethnic background gives Philip Seymour Hoffman a little more to work with. In satire we're not supposed to care about the fate of individuals: They're stick figures who enact their typologies in order to illuminate the work's critique of their actions and beliefs.

Patriotic satire, however, as Sorkin and Nichols practice it, gives us the stereotypes without the critique. Maybe the filmmakers would be a little chagrined at the notion of "Stand up and Cheer," but they do want us to feel good about the quirky ways in which Charlie, Gust, and Joanne earned glory and changed the world. No doubt it's unfair to compare *Charlie Wilson's War* with a real political satire, but there's a case to be made that viewers of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove...* indeed feel good, against their better judgment, about the quirky ways that Slim Pickens, as Major Kong, flies his airplane into Soviet territory and manages to drop his nuclear bomb. What *Charlie Wilson's War* lacks most is sufficient acknowledgement of its equivalent to the ensuing mushroom cloud.—Robert Sklar

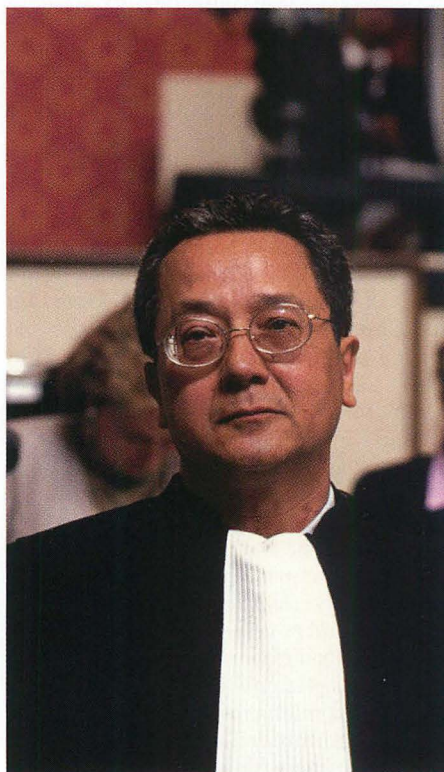
Terror's Advocate

Produced by Rita Dagher; directed by Barbet Schroeder; cinematography by Caroline Champetier and Jean-Luc Perréard; edited by Nelly Quettier; original music by Jorge Arriagada; narrated by Barbet Schroeder; with Jacques Vergès, Abderrahmane Benhamida, Bachir Boumaâza, Isabelle Coutant-Peyne, Lionel Duroy, Hans-Joachim Klein, Magdalena Kopp, Gilles Ménage, Siné, and Martine Tigrane. Color, 135 mins. French, English, German and Khmer dialog with English subtitles. A Magnolia Pictures release.

The ostensible subject of *Terror's Advocate* is French lawyer Jacques Vergès, who has made a career out of defending the twentieth century's villains—terrorists, hijackers, dictators, and war criminals. By patiently, repeatedly calling this category into question, Barbet Schroeder's new film gives us a version of history the more terrifying for its absence of evildoers. Such is the implication of one of Vergès's very first pieces of audacity when, as a young lawyer, he leaves Paris to defend the captured FLN fighter Djamilah Bouhired in Algiers in 1957. Here he establishes his juridical style, his *stratégie de rupture*—where instead of a careful attempt to convince judge or jury, it is the proceeding itself which is put on trial: as a hypocritical show, a travesty, a sham.

This strategy was born of necessity when faced with a hostile colonial court in Algeria (it is de Gaulle's pardon, not the courts, that eventually spares Bouhired). Vergès nevertheless pursues it for the rest of his life with a dizzying, sometimes discomfiting zeal. Those who have no trouble seeing in Djamilah a noble partisan for Algerian independence may find Vergès's defense of El Al hijackers in the late 1960s or of Nazi Klaus Barbie in 1987 more difficult to digest. If there is something distasteful here there is also a startling consistency which, as the film goes on, has less and less to do with evil, and the malleable nature of this concept (the notion that one man's freedom fighter is another's terrorist being, by now, a sort of platitude), and more about whether the guilty, the irreparably, irredeemably guilty, have the right to be truly and passionately defended. One gets the sense that this is how Vergès sees his life's work. The narrative strength of the film is to show us how the singular pursuit of this idea can disappear into such morally tenebrous terrain. In a revealing and wry exchange Vergès quips, "I'd defend Hitler. I'd even defend Bush, provided one thing... he plead guilty." For Vergès, guilt and the treatment of the guilty—not innocence and its patient demonstration—is the sole way of evaluating justice; the more numerous and insuperable the crimes of the individual, the more imperative his need for defense. One leaves the theater not knowing whether Vergès is a modern Atticus Finch or his monstrous inversion.

Despite its easy designation as a documentary, it makes more sense to think about *Terror's Advocate* in relation to excellent courtroom dramas like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Anatomy of a Murder*, as well as to cinematic history most broadly. The musical score by Jorge Arriagada, for instance, known for his work with *auteurs* like Raul Ruiz and Olivier Assayas, bubbles and trills with violins and thudding piano chords. The music lends the photos, testimonials, and documentary footage a sense of nervous expectancy; a mystery is unfolding in minor key, which circles back on Algeria. Here Vergès and former FLN fighters tour the prison cells where the latter awaited their executions in 1957. Schroeder moves seamlessly between these contemporary sequences and newspaper headlines and trial images from the time, making liberal and striking use of *The Battle of Algiers*. Pontecorvo's film is not only pertinent; its realism drastically alters the conceit of *Terror's Advocate* by implying that the fictional gives us certain inimitable ways of seeing the truth, and of documenting political reality. The fact that Schroeder interviews FLN bomber Saadi Yacef, who played himself in Pontecorvo's 1966 film, adds to our growing sense that these figures are already actors. Far from giving us unique access to the unglamorous, toned-down truth, Schroeder plays on the deceitful qualities of the image. If all great films are documentaries, this documentary avails itself of fiction to deliver the truth in all of its ambiguity.



Jacques Vergès, controversial French lawyer, is profiled in Barbet Schroeder's documentary, *Terror's Advocate*.

If the film is steeped in serious cinema, Vergès himself often comes across as humorous, almost slapstick. One has trouble deciding exactly whom he resembles. In certain scenes, as he leans coolly over a courtroom banister, for example, one thinks of George C. Scott and Peter Sellers at the same time—Dr. Strangelove if he'd gotten interested in Lenin. As he reenacts Djamilah's trial to an empty courtroom, and shouts his insolent question to the absent judge, "Is this a court of justice or a meeting of assassins?" he recalls the smug contempt of the badly mistreated Spencer Tracy character in Fritz Lang's *Fury*. At other moments Schroeder poses Vergès in his law office, a large greenish tapestry behind him, marble bodhisattvas and bronze paperweights strewn about his desk, smoke wafting lazily from a lit cigar. The scene is not an office but a hideout: one thinks of James Bond's nemesis Ernst Blofeld. Vergès himself seems aware that, as Schroeder has remarked, he is "definitively a character in a novel." This is precisely what makes him attractive as a character—this uncanny flirtation, at once dangerous and slightly ridiculous.

While the film does not entirely dispel the mystery surrounding Vergès, it does provide us with new insights into his historical animus. The literature on Vergès tends to stress the discrimination he suffered as a child in Reunion—as the son of a Vietnamese woman and a French colonial administrator—to explain his fierce identification with anticolonial movements as an adult. His own statements, in the film and in many of his books, also emphasize his intimate understanding of the Algerian and Palestinian struggles. From its opening frames, the film suggests something considerably more complex. Far from exuding bitterness or a sense of exclusion based on his mixed-race background, Vergès comes across as someone deeply, even idiosyncratically French. He recounts how, in fighting with de Gaulle's Free French Forces in Africa and Europe, he received only one injury, which he carries to this day: a scar from getting his finger stuck in an oyster. He mirthfully refers to himself as a "real gourmand" and mentions his love of Montaigne and Diderot. Indeed his performance in *Terror's Advocate*—where he moves between personal reflections, biblical parables, and jokes, and where he analyzes the judicial system and the state—purposely nurtures this comparison to Montaigne and his soaring conversiveness in *Essais*. It is not a colonial grudge but rather a profound sense of disillusionment with the French who, upon liberating Paris, proceeded almost immediately to the Sétif massacre in Algeria. It is hard to underestimate this point for Vergès, who gives the impression of a young man struggling to reconcile the realities of colonial exploitation with his fervent belief that "the idea of there not being a France is intolerable to me." What is fascinating about Vergès

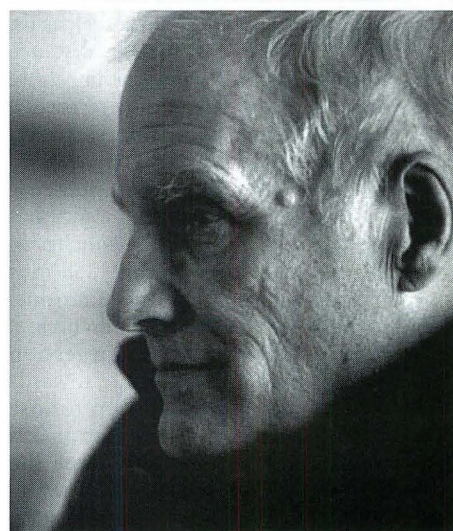
is precisely that he is peculiarly French, a kind of neo-Enlightenment figure, who pursues the logic—in this case a certain notion of justice, a certain identification with the guilty—to its absolute limit. When a judge accuses Vergès of being a “traitor” during a trial, it is not—it is not only—as an ungrateful colonial subject but most certainly as a Frenchman.

His immersion in French political life is one reason why Vergès’s eight-year disappearance between 1970 and 1978 poses a baffling riddle—one which *Terror’s Advocate* diligently details and embroiders in the spirit of a spy film, without ever solving. Friends and enemies speculate on his whereabouts and the reason for Vergès’s own silence on the subject. This provides one of the central narrative thrusts of the film and plunges us into, among other locations, the jungles of Cambodia to interview surviving members of Pol Pot’s entourage (a bloody figure with whom Vergès had been close friends since their meeting at the Sorbonne). Many other theories are briefly touched upon as well: that Vergès was in Cuba; that he was imprisoned in China for several years after being employed as a Chinese agent; that he worked in Eastern Europe for the KGB or, instead, for the Stasi; or that he made his way to the PLO training camps in Libya or Jordan. While the ostensible subject remains the mystery of Vergès and his disappearance, what gradually envelops even his formidable persona is the history of a spectacular form of political violence in the twentieth century: terrorism. This will serve as a true revelation for certain members of the American audience, in particular, who often have the vague sense that terrorism arrived in the West on September 11th, 2001. To the academic and political connoisseurs of terror, the film likewise provides a strong rebuttal: to terror as the clash of civilizations (Huntington) or its attribution to some kind of ‘islamo-fascism’ (Fukuyama) or to those for whom it represents an unclassifiable, unprecedented threat, a kind of absolute immorality (the Bush Administration).

We instead see modern terrorism as it emerges from the ideological tumult of the 1970s—one that spans Europe and the Middle East and inculcates diverse, often (on their face at least) wildly contradictory elements: from Neo-Nazis such as Swiss lawyer François Genoud to Magdalena Kopp and other members of the militant, ultraleft Baader-Meinhof Group. At the shifting, unseen center is Waddi Haddad, a secular, college-educated Syrian who helps found and then run the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)—perhaps the first sophisticated international network of terrorists and financiers, whose Marxist, antiimperialist rhetoric saw the group’s ambition and reach exceed simple demands for a Palestinian state. The terrorist attacks and trials that flit by like news flashes are

riveting precisely because they defy that touchstone of cinematic banality: “the U.S. government does not negotiate with terrorists.” FPLP fighter Mahab Souleiman (defended by Vergès) launches a grenade attack on the Athens airport only to be released two years later after another plane is hijacked; later, in 1975, Ilitch Ramírez Sánchez, a.k.a. Carlos the Jackal, (another Vergès client, and friend) flies to Algiers after taking about forty hostages at the OPEC headquarters in Vienna. Terrorism here is not even predominantly Muslim or Middle Eastern. The political charge of the film resides, in part, in the simple fact that it depicts a society dealing with the threat of terrorism in an altogether different fashion. Vergès’s record of defending the most infamous perpetrators of this violence—and doing so with galling sympathy—mocks the widely held notion that those we now label “enemy combatants” do not and *cannot* have the right to a trial, let alone a fair and timely one, or to a lawyer or to habeas corpus. In *Terror’s Advocate* the terrorist loses his carefully constructed aura of legal exceptionality.

For Vergès the current machinations of the U.S. Justice Department are not only nefarious, they also betray a certain inelegance, a lack of awareness of what can be done with existing materials. It is the trial itself which historically furnishes the state with its greatest tales of moral courage and legal transparency. It is not necessary to sequester the prisoner or to hide him on a tropical island but rather to place him in the full light of a billion flash bulbs. This is the true import of Vergès’s famous *stratégie de rupture*—not simply to question the legitimacy of the proceedings but to do so on the level of the trial *as* spectacle. We thus see the intricate preparations for the trial of captured Nazi Klaus Barbie in 1987—the construction of a special stage for the judge, jury, and witnesses, all with the best possible angles for the television cameras. Vergès did not contest the guilt of Barbie, as such—the evidence against whom (for his deportation and torture of Jews, resistance fighters, and others as head of the Gestapo in Lyon) was immense. For Vergès the symbolic mission of the trial is singular: to demonstrate the piety of the state and to do so by punctuating the brutal, unresolved history of the Second World War with a grand show. Against such official sanctimoniousness and its inevitable distortions, everything is justified: Vergès attempts to put Barbie’s crimes in perspective by condemning all of France for the deportations and torture, for Vichy, for the massacres in Algeria and in Cambodia, as well as the Jews for their treatment of the Palestinians. It is significant that Schroeder never shows us this or any other trial. The actual judicial circus in which Vergès plays his disruptive part is somehow unimportant to both the director and his subject: the real battle is always symbolic; the game is won or



Top to bottom: Vergès’ clients have included NLF guerrilla Djamilah Bouhired, PLO leader Yasser Arafat and former Nazi Klaus Barbie.

lost somewhere else. Perhaps we simply get no closer to the truth about terrorism in exchanging the spectacle of the attack for the spectacle of the courtroom. The trial of Barbie is thus exemplary, and in more ways than one. If the state wants a highly visible trial to comfort its audience (the victims, the bystanders and so on), Vergès will do his best to terrify them instead; to reroute the spectacle away from false contrition into something painful. This is the real scandal of his method—and also the reason it never goes very far beyond itself.

One of the strengths of Schroeder's film is that it closely follows Vergès without ever fully embracing him. Even so, the film offers up a formal composition driven by the provocations of its eighty-three-year-old protagonist. *Terror's Advocate* is, for example, a documentary on terrorism that is sometimes a thriller and more often than not a love story. Vergès doesn't just defend Djamilah Bouhired, he falls in love with and marries her. As Carlos orders the bombing of TGV trains to pressure the French government to release his wife and fellow "terrorist," Magdalena Kopp, Vergès visits her in prison constantly and memorializes his sentiments in a book, *La Beauté du Crime*. There is much discussion of a slightly hideous jumper Kopp knits for Vergès while incarcerated. "I never knit a jumper for Carlos," she says in a tone at once intensely suggestive and almost childish. *Terror's Advocate* is, indeed, one of those rare films that captures the often strange ways in which sex and violence are linked through desire. Among the militants themselves, there is a sense of possibility, a belief in the necessity of magnificent actions, that is strangely redolent, and unrepentantly so. Far from portraying them as naïve or simply misguided, Schroeder uses the interviews with former FLN, FPLP, and RFA militants (at some point "terrorist" ceases to designate anything at all), to render the full tragedy of their lives; a sense that political conviction could have meant something else for them, as well as us.

Terror's Advocate is in the last instance also a trial—in this case of a lawyer whose policy, it seems, is to defend only terrorists; who has done much to arouse the suspicion that the terrorist and the lawyer who defends him are one and the same. Schroeder calls into question both this logic that places the terrorist and those he touches in the shadows—of justice, morality, serious investigation, or historical explanations. Vergès, who is free to make his own case, meanwhile leaves us with the impression that what is heroic in his attitude towards his clients has often allowed him to lose sight of the particulars of their actions. If Schroeder's camera does not escape the game of power and of judgment, it nevertheless implies that, in the pursuit of justice, it may not always be necessary to choose between attacking the prosecution and convincing the jury.—**Alexander Zevin**

Alexandra

Produced by Laurent Danielou and Andrei Sigle; written and directed by Alexander Sokurov; cinematography by Alexander Burov; production design by Dmitri Malach-Konkov; edited by Sergei Ivanov; original music by Andre Sigle; starring Galina Vishnevskaya, Vasily Shevtsov and Raisa Givhaeva. Color, 92 mins. A Cinema Guild release.

Alexandra follows a deceptively simple storyline: Alexandra Nikolevna (Galina Vishnevskaya) arrives in the Chechen Republic to visit her grandson (Vasily Shevtsov), the captain of a Russian base near Grozny. She stays for a few days, talks to the soldiers, goes to a local market and departs when her grandson leaves to go on maneuvers. As writer/director Alexander Sokurov told an interviewer, "In this film about war there is no war... there is no poetry in war, no beauty and it should never be filmed poetically: it is a horror that cannot be expressed, human degradation that cannot be expressed." To make this warless war film, Sokurov topsy-turves all the conventions, as if trumping audience expectations, denying the voyeuristically comforting pay-offs of action, killing, and gore. Rather than the photogenic, odor-free world of idealized destruction, he presents an outpost of tedium and quiet despair. The real locations and documentary aspect of *Alexandra* are specific to Chechnya, but the lethal absurdities that fuel perpetual war apply anywhere.

At the film's center and in nearly every frame is Galina Vishnevskaya, *Alexandra* her debut feature. A well-known Bolshoi Theater soprano, Vishnevskaya is solid and monumental, a diva, no question, though she plays the Everywoman Alexandra unaffectedly and straight. Strolling amidst the men and ordnance in her matronly shift, anklets, and sandals, she leaves an impression simultaneously indomitable and ridiculous. But when she literally lets her hair down with her grandson, a great deal of her natural

authority softens into an unexpected girlishness.

Like his protagonist, Sokurov keeps an observational, steady, and slow pace. Sound effects are limited to the rumble of trucks and tanks, the whirl of a hovering helicopter, the dull exchanges of men waiting for the next mission. He knows the audience is familiar with all of it, every aspect endemic to such formless and seemingly interminable conflicts. Much as he did in *Confession* (*From the Commander's Diary: A Cinema Narrative in Five Parts*, 1998), and *Spiritual Voices: From the Military Diaries* (1995)—though in less detail—Sokurov takes meticulous note of the soldiers' routines (see Louis Menashe's "The Lonely Voice of Sokurov," *Cineaste*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1).

The opening shot lingers on the back of Alexandra's kerchiefed head as she gazes out of the freight train into the torrid, unpromising landscape, a way station en route to the base. By the next cut, her feet are on the ground, arms akimbo as she resists local offers of help, seeking out the Russian soldiers instead—her luggage, a collapsible market cart, its wheels useless on the unpaved roads. The soldiers deliver her to an armored train for the last part of the journey. A small unit shares the freight wagon with her, the commanding officer discouraging when one of the young men perches next to her. Already, Alexandra's femaleness and peacetime ways set her apart, the uprooted young men reduced to the stressful boredom of trying to stay alive.

There's a sense of foreboding in the scene. Edgy and exhausted, the young soldiers fiddle with their weapons—the music portentous, the camera scanning face after face, everything pointing to action. There is none. As one of the officers later tells her, "It's almost war here." Paradoxically, this defusing of expectations makes the film more tense, the possibility of some horror always hanging in the air. *Alexandra* proves to be something of a shaggy dog story, digging up the familiar bones of war movie clichés only to find they're full of sawdust.



Alexandra (Galina Vishnevskaya, right) strolls casually around the Russian military compound in Chechnya in this scene from Alexander Sokurov's *Alexandra*.

As Alexandra moves into this world, each transition mirrors a stage of birth. She arrives at night, only learning the contours of her new world after she's slept in it. With no stepladder to descend from the freight train, she allows a soldier to position her feet like a newborn's to get her down. Other soldiers then manipulate her on to a tank ("a nice memory for you," as one of the soldiers notes), her initiation into this world complete. Her expression of gentle irony never changes and though she clearly doesn't belong among them, she looks less the alien than they do.

Billeted in the flimsy tent-barracks, she awakes to find her grandson fetal-curlled, asleep on the cot alongside hers. Their greeting is less familial than postcoital, right down to her playful reminder that he's forgotten his towel as he goes off to shower. Out in the camp, she watches as the young, shirtless men clean their rifles. Her grandson brings her to one of the tanks, boosts her in, joins her and closes the hatch. Here, as she did at the barracks, she comments on the smell. "It's the guns, the iron, the men—you get used to it," her grandson tells her, noting that there are usually ten of them crammed into a space already cozy with just two. Alexandra hoists a machine gun with rather more skill than one would expect and pulls the trigger: "It's so easy." Yet later, when her grandson admits to qualms about killing, her reassurance that "a man down isn't necessarily dead" is more commanding officer than granny.

Lifting her out of the tank, her grandson carries her across the camp like a bride. Even a visiting grandmother is a woman in the reduced-to-basics world of the base; it's as if her grandson has lost the ability to relate any other way. All he knows, he tells her later, is how to shoot. When he offers to plait her hair, she tells him, "You smell good, the way men smell." His reply—"Women are all the same"—a testimony to the ways this degraded life makes of every particular a generality.

Though she's docile in his company, Alexandra dismisses the soldier-minder her grandson assigns to her, making her own rounds of the camp. Unwilling to stay put, she agrees to get the base-bound sentries cookies and cigarettes at the local market. Cashless, she's offered credit and even a cup of tea by her Chechen peer, Malinka (Raissa Givhaeva). Despite the genuine fellow feeling between the women, Alexandra accepts the favors as a matter of course, even as her due, a subtle implication of the relationship between the occupier and the occupied.

In the most arresting shot of the film, the women pick their way through the ruins of Malinka's block of flats, on their way to share tea at her apartment. Beneath the accorded façade, tenants appear, skirting the detritus, doing their best to treat this cartoonishly reshaped building as normal. More wreckage is on view through Malinka's window. The bombed-out places all look the



After visiting her son, Alexandra prepares to leave Chechnya in *Alexandra*.

same, lacking the distinction of their particular place, everything similarly ruined. Like Alexandra's grandson, Malinka talks of getting used to things. This is perpetual war as people live it, the tensions droning and incessant rather than intense and incisive.

The young teenager who guides Alexandra back to the base tells her that it's not up to you to give us our freedom. "Who's us?" she asks, adding, "if only it were that simple." They stand for a few minutes at the gate to the base, the soldiers and the young man virtually interchangeable, separated only by uniforms and a line in the dirt. The instances of understanding—with the boy, with the sentries, with Malinka—are tiny gestures, nearly imperceptible but personal, momentary, and specific.

In his recent work, Sokurov has been looking at the peculiarities and especially the insularity of power. His oblique approach to Hitler (*Moloch*, 1999), Lenin (*Telets*, 2001), and Hirohito (*The Sun*, 2005) dispenses with the familiar narratives, focusing instead on the individuals, often strangely limited, perverted by power. *Alexandra* is a variation on this theme, with the Chechen war itself the engine of corrupting power against which Alexandra offers astonishing contrast, estranging the too-familiar images of a war zone and base merely by walking through them as if she were navigating city streets.

Alexandra's palette is khaki and olive, a world of fatigue-colored landscapes. The washed-out colors emphasize the futility of the struggle both for the soldiers and the locals, the land already too tired to offer comfort or sustenance. But like so much else in *Alexandra*, the look of the film is contradictory, both dank and dusty. The images bleed out the sides, the off-screen action evident only in the mess left behind. By showing the tedium of war, of men tending the equipment, waiting for food or orders or permission to sleep, Sokurov leaves their horror to our imagination. His soldiers do nothing more than mark time. Paradoxically, *Alexandra's* present-day and geographically specific setting give it a universal and timeless quality: the sparsely inhabited, bombed-out terrain could be any conflict situation. Awash in war imagery on television and elsewhere, it's easy to forget the aberration that war is. Alexandra goes a long

way to restoring to perpetual warfare its fundamental perversion.

Even if Vishnevskaya were less in-dominatable, Sokurov took a gamble pivoting his film on a woman born in 1926. There are parallels to characters played by Esther Gorintin in *Voyages* (2001) and, particularly, in *Since Otav Left* (2004), each film also about the post-Soviet East. Set loose from their domestic context, these women are free agents, moving (admittedly at a plodding rate) almost unseen. But Gorontin's characters, though intrepid enough, make enormous changes quite late in their lives (traveling to Israel in search of a cousin in *Voyages*, ferreting out the truth about her dead son in Paris in *Since Otav Left*), functioning largely in the world of the personal. Vishnevskaya's Alexandra has politics foisted on her at every turn, refused in the market when they hear her Russian, faced with the "us-and-them" of life at the base. Centering his film on such an uncontrollable woman, whose wily power has no customary quantifier, Sokurov depicts a less traditional form of power; Alexandra has lived long and will likely outlast some of the recruits with whom she shares the camp. Alexandra does nothing she's told and little anyone expects. Even her shapeless outfits work to her advantage, her clothes the uniform of those of whom society has no real expectation and for whom it makes little if any provision. He stakes his ironies on her personality, on the goofy eroticism she expresses with her grandson, on the sexually appreciative once-over she gives the young men who surround her, on the flirty nurturing with the troops she presents with treats. Clearly, Alexandra represents a version of mother Russia, even a stand-in for Alexander Sokurov himself, but more important is the contradiction to the regimentation and limited life view she represents. Intelligence, she insists, not brute strength, is what really makes a man. Her grandson listens but remains unconvinced.

Alexandra has the open-endedness and resonance of a short story. What Sokurov chooses not to show matters nearly as much as what is on screen. His radical choice isn't simply to be against war, but to subvert the solace of war-movie conventions, including a "war hero" who answers to grandma.—

Megan Ratner

The Year My Parents Went on Vacation

Produced by Cao Hamburger, Caio Gullane and Fabiano Gullane; directed by Cao Hamburger; screenplay by Claudio Galperin, Cao Hamburger, Bráulio Mantovan, Anna Muylaert and Adriana Falcão; cinematography by Adriano Goldman; production design by Cassio Amarante and Daniel Rezende; original music by Beto Villares; starring Michel Joelsas, Germano Haiut, Paulo Autran, Simone Spoladore, Eduardo Moreira, Caio Blat, Daniela Piepszyk, Liliana Castro and Rodrigo dos Santos. Color, 104 mins., Portuguese and Yiddish dialog with English subtitles. Distributed by City Lights Pictures.

Like its recent Chilean counterpart, *Machuca*, Cao Hamburger's *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation* looks at life in a dictatorship through a child's eyes. In some ways, the films' thematic similarity is understandable; the generation that approached adolescence during the reign of the Latin American military rulers has reached adulthood, their youths inevitably shaped by the violence that wracked their countries. (Albertina Carri's *Los Rubios* similarly looks at the effects of this period on her own Argentine family, but through an adult perspective and with a more documentary approach.)

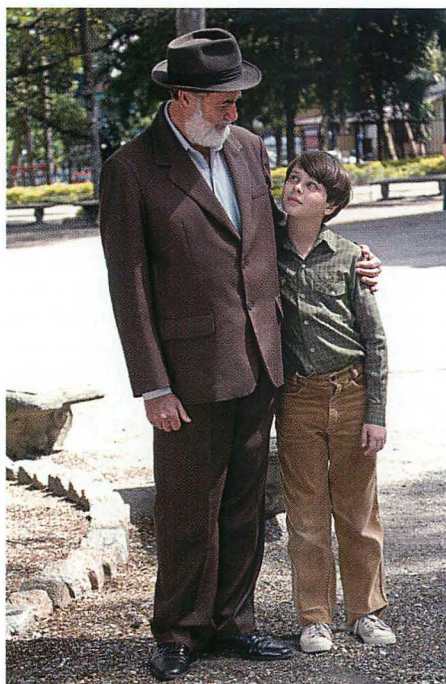
But the two films also have significant differences: *Machuca* wistfully examines the brief utopian moment in Chile when Allende came to power, and the swift, brutal destruction that followed shortly after when the right-wing coup brought him down; in the process *Machuca* suggests that class differences during the Pinochet era simply could not be bridged, even with the best of intentions.

By contrast, *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation* isn't particularly concerned with questions of wealth and poverty; here, the parents who go "on vacation" (their ironic euphemism for hiding from the government's military goons) are middle class and educated, as many Brazilian leftists were. Neither the *favela* nor the poor Northeast come into play. Instead, the film examines the intricacies of community, including a community rarely seen in Brazilian cinema: the Ashkenazi Jews who settled in São Paulo, many during or after the Second World War. The drama is a study in darkness and light, frequently filled with a sense of nervousness and displacement, but also with warmth, humor, and intimacy. A touch of nostalgia suffuses the story also, due to the sparse, yet meaningful, voice-over narration from the protagonist as an adult.

The year when the parents of twelve-year-old Mauro (Michel Joelsas) went on vacation was 1970; an opening title recalls

that by this time, "man had already visited the moon" and "Pelé scored his thousandth goal." Both events point to a world of hope, happiness, and unbounded potential that contrasts with the narrative's sense of irretrievable loss. For this was Brazil's darkest period of political repression, when leftist protestors were rounded up, artists sent into exile, and free speech ruthlessly curtailed by vigilant censors. Most of this is beyond Mauro's comprehension; he hasn't yet quite grasped what "vacation" signifies (the very phrase is a shield for both him and his family) or why he's being dropped at the doorstep of Mótél (Paulo Autran), the Jewish grandfather he doesn't know. And when he discovers that his grandfather died suddenly earlier that day, Mauro is suddenly stranded and dependent on the kindness of Mótél's neighbors—caught in a world that is as foreign to him as outer space. The Yiddish spoken in the hallway, the Hebrew prayers, the Jewish meals, the perplexing customs all vary from the typically Brazilian way of life. The film's musical soundtrack enhances and plays on this, shifting across styles from evocative Semitic melodies to samba and beyond, depending on the action.

At first barricading himself in his grandfather's now-empty apartment, necessity—including the basic need for food—compels Mauro to open up and begin to see life differently. He's guided by two very different forces along the way—Shlomo (Germano Haiut), the elderly Orthodox Jew who lives next door to Mótél, and an enterprising nonsense girl his age named Hanna (Daniela Piepszyk), whose dark eyes follow Mauro



Mauro (Michel Joelsas) with his grandfather Mótél (Paulo Autran) in Cao Hamburger's *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation*.

with interest when she sees this newcomer enter the building. For Shlomo, initially resistant to taking charge of the boy, the *mitzvah* of sheltering becomes almost a religious imperative, as the local rabbi compares the abandoned Mauro to Moses left by the river in his basket. But Mótél and Hanna are not alone in their concern. Scenes portraying acts of kindness accumulate, dramatizing the ways in which people can come together to help in a crisis: they become the village it takes to raise a child. The building's owner sometimes looks after Mauro, Hanna's mother and a group of older women join Shlomo in providing meals, a pretty and friendly barmaid leads him home when he gets lost on the unfamiliar streets, and Ítalo (Caio Blat), a friend of Mauro's father and another revolutionary, keeps a watchful eye on the boy. Hamburger's style tends either to brevity or to montage that links different spaces, suggesting either harmony between them or conflict arising from desire for another place—most particularly, in quick, atmospheric shots of Mauro's now-empty house back in Belo Horizonte. A picture of the world develops through a swift series of actions and moments, but they follow so naturally as never to seem rushed. This portrait achieves the certain rhythm of day-to-day life passing by, and that's what mostly takes over as Mauro builds friendships, experiences romantic longings, and grows closer to Shlomo.

The Year My Parents Went on Vacation examines not only a boy's loneliness and coming of age, but also the various factions and ethnicities in the Bom Retiro neighborhood, where Jew, Italian, and an array of other groups live in close proximity. (The Jews and the Italians even have their own soccer match, symbolizing their still-strong sense of cultural identity: "São Paulo's so big that it has people from around the world who support every team," Mauro's voice-over notes.)

The film also subtly portrays Mauro's growing understanding of what his parents face as he watches some of his new friends fall prey to the same government that forced his family underground. While the film's central section generally focuses on everyday details, and Mauro's acculturation, it never loses an underlying melancholy and danger. Even as Mauro fully participates in the first Bar Mitzvah he's ever attended, the sound of horses and soldiers riding in interrupts, and the hall empties out as the fearful crowd watches the police violently raid a socialist headquarters. Graffiti on a nearby stone wall reads, "Down with the Dictatorship," and a very brief insert shot shows someone taking advantage of night's darkness to spray-paint another slogan. When Mauro questions Ítalo about where his parents might be, Ítalo won't veer from the line that his parents are "on vacation." "Sure...vacation," Mauro mutters, aware by now that these words hide a bitter truth.



Mauro with his new friend Hanna (Daniela Piepszyk) in *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation*.

The Jewish perspective, while perhaps partly determined by Hamburger's own background, is also an interesting one because these are characters who, presumably, know firsthand what a fascist government is capable of. Mauro mentions that his grandfather fought the Nazis, and the older characters who would have shared that experience remain apprehensive and anxious. Among themselves, they may whisper briefly and nervously that Mauro's father is rumored to be a communist, but that thought is swiftly silenced in solidarity with one of their own.

Juxtaposed with the political thread is the soccer theme: Mauro's father has promised to return by the time Brazil plays in the World Cup, and when the games begin Mauro alternates watching the match with looking out the window for a glimpse of the family's blue Beetle. But even more, the sport serves as a symbol of fragile national unity. Through montages of people of different ages and backgrounds all watching the games intently, of Brazilian flags hung out of windows, of Pelé kicking yet another winning goal, Hamburger captures the crucial role of soccer in the Brazilian consciousness. It becomes perhaps one of the only things people of different persuasions can agree upon in a time of upheaval and horror. No matter what is going on politically, an important game provides a rare instance when everyone can cheer Brazil and feel nationalistic. Like *carnaval*, it serves as a form of social glue. And, in many ways, that is the focus of *The Year My Parents Went on Vacation*: if the dictatorship is like the background of a quilt, the characters form the colorful, distinctive pattern that catches the eye, a design comprising well-drawn humans surviving a difficult historical moment.

For Mauro, personally, soccer also becomes a form of self-definition: at the start of the film, he remembers that his

father said that "everyone in soccer can make a mistake—except the goalkeeper." As the film progresses, Mauro gradually realizes that this is the position he wants to play—one too often unsung because it doesn't involve the audience-thrilling action of blasting the ball into the net and scoring. But if the goalkeeper isn't the player that wins the game, he is the one who can stop the game from being lost.

The film's end seems, perhaps, a bit abrupt, but it's still emotion-filled. And Hamburger makes an inspired choice for the music that accompanies the final credits: Caetano Veloso's seminal song, *Tropicalia* (performed by the popular post-bossa nova singer Céu). In his multilayered, evocative words, Veloso—who himself was forced into exile during exactly the period in which *The Year My Parents...* unfolds—captures all the beauty and the ugliness, the resilience and the terror, the desire for liberation and its suppression that comprised that tumultuous time.—Karen Backstein

Funny Games

Produced by Christian Baute, Chris Coen, Hamish McAlpine, and Andro Steinborn; directed by Michael Haneke, based on his 1997 film *Funny Games*; screenplay by Michael Haneke; cinematography by Darius Khondji; production design by Kevin Thompson; costumes by David C. Robinson; edited by Monika Willi; Naomi Watts, Tim Roth, Michael Pitt, Brady Corbet, Devon Gearhart. Color, 112 mins. A Warner Independent Pictures release.

The arrival of Michael Haneke's English-language remake of his baldly provocative 1997 film, *Funny Games*, is like the reboot of a computer that downloads all sorts of (cultural) software. The program titles might

run from "Why Re-Do Exactly What's Already Been Done?" to "The Moral Responsibility of the American Moviegoer in the New Century," leading on to fun ones like "The Chasm Between the Film Critic and the Filmgoer." Precisely because Haneke conceived of his original and his nearly exact duplicate not as genre movies but as critiques of genre, and as polemical vessels for a nest of issues rather than as what he's termed a "consumable" entertainment, the new film is best addressed not in terms of whether it actually works on screen, but as an object that spews out ideas—and in terms of whether the ideas convince. This use of a film as topic-machine rather than as a drama or a slasher movie remains as controversial and dubious in the view of some critics now (see Derek Elley's *Variety* review from the 2007 London Film Festival) as it was when the original Austrian *Funny Games* premiered to a violently split crowd in Cannes, and it suggests that much of the forthcoming critical response—especially among the clusters of North American critics who've never seen the original, and perhaps know Haneke only previously from *Cache*—will repeat a similar complaint: A violent horror-thriller about two young effete killers systematically torturing and killing a family must first provide catharsis, and then, only secondarily (if at all), address moral and cultural issues.

As in the old *Funny Games*, the remake centers on the happy family of Anna (Naomi Watts), George (Tim Roth), and their young son Georgie (Devon Gearhart), vacationing at their lakeside summer home, when two young men, Paul (Michael Pitt) and Peter (Brady Corbet)—whose only outward sign of suspicion is that they're wearing white cotton gloves—are introduced to them by neighbors. From here, the two men deploy a seemingly innocent ruse to enter the home and proceed to slowly terrorize the family. Originally conceived as an American horror show which Haneke, for practical reasons, had to set in Austria, the new version brings things back home as it were, exactly replicating the 1997 version, down to the physical layout of the house, the color schemes, props, and even the various day and nighttime light tones in exterior shots. Among other things, this proves for certain that—whether he uses the great cinematographer Jurgen Jurgens (for the 1997 version) or the great Darius Khondji (for the new film)—Haneke is fundamentally his own cinematographer exercising considerable control over the entire look of his films.

Much had been made, in 1997, of Haneke's deliberately upturning the notion of what genre is supposed to do. By forcing audiences through cleverly surreptitious devices and shock moments to confront their own implicit bloodlust and manipulated desire for revenge against evil depicted on screen, he was effectively putting on trial a whole corral of movies that use violence to

titillate and emotionally cleanse. But what was at least as important was Haneke's interest in alienating the audience against the movie itself and in foregrounding issues inside the Trojan Horse of thriller conventions. This was by far the most "Germanic" aspect of *Funny Games*—the Brechtian tradition of commenting on the drama itself, the direct confrontation with the audience by characters—not in a Shakespearean aside as a third party overhearing the conversation or as a friend being confessed to, but as an outside party who may either want to join in on the mayhem or, as a potential opponent, who must be convinced. When Paul, the brains of the pair, looks back to the audience with a wink in one scene or with a question in another ("You're on their side, aren't you?"), Brecht's alienation effect is in full force, alternating between collusion and confrontation.

It's also worth noting in this regard that the original *Funny Games* was read differently based on critics' national/cultural origins. Many European and English-language critics expressed mild forms of outrage along with admiration, but generally set their criticism against the backdrop of the American slasher movie that the film was subverting. Almost alone, Austrian critics (with their easy access to the Austro-German genre), cited the attempts of *Funny Games* to undermine the "heimat" film and its extolling of home-based bourgeois values. Although this is certainly valid, and brings up a theme of the paradoxes of critical response I'll discuss later, it does not lessen Haneke's primary mission from the start against the American brand of exploitation—and the moral matter of the human consequences of violence inflicted by one character (good or evil) on another. And because of this, it works to answer the hypothetical question, "Why Re-Do It?"

Haneke all along imagined and intended *Funny Games* as an American-produced film set in America involving American characters. *Funny Games U.S.* is, then in fact, the film that Haneke had ideally and initially devised.

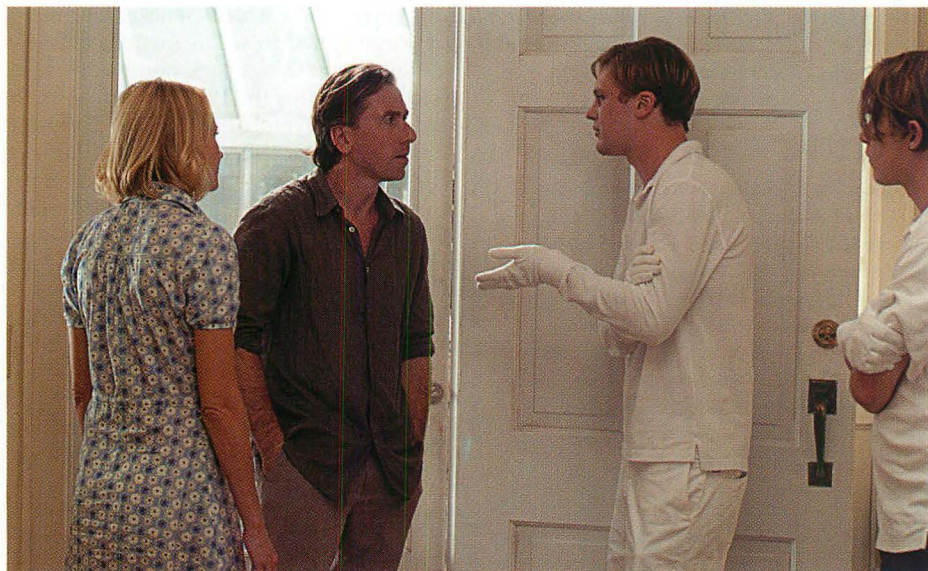
The moral challenges that both films pose remain the same, while the context and purposes have changed. Given the films he made after 1997, I had presumed that Haneke had privately determined that he had failed with the original *Funny Games*—that he concluded his techniques for forcing the audience out of their comfort zones to examine their roles as consumers and, even more radically, his techniques for opening up the possibility that audiences could colude with the killers, were simply beyond the pale. (The film's most notorious example of this is the much-discussed scene when Anna, the mother, shoots Paul's partner Peter with a rifle, followed by Paul's frantically finding the TV remote control to rewind the scene in order to make things go his way—thus tripping up an audience who had found themselves rooting for a murder.) It seemed reasonable to assume that the wide-ranging survey of European disquiet represented by *Code Unknown* and the observation of human beings surviving in the wake of civilization's collapse in *Time of the Wolf* were two means for Haneke to get beyond the facile gamesmanship of his previous *cause célèbre*. I had also perhaps been engaging in my own game, which was to project my extreme disappointment with the 1997 film as pushing things so far as to invite the audience to join in on the murdering itself—that Haneke's original purpose was so undone in the thrill of the act of moviemaking that Paul's contact with the viewer was more than that—it had become an alliance, capped by a closing shot that seemed to seal a complicity between viewers

and the Paul-Peter team. But for Haneke to actually revisit *Funny Games*—and not just revisit, but remake it down to a virtual duplicate shot for shot—indicated that this assumption, this projection, was wrong, and that something else was going on. And it was this: *Funny Games* from its title on, had to be in English.

It can't be overstated that the effect of hearing what is essentially the same film over again (that reboot effect), now, in one's native language utterly transforms the experience of the film itself. This goes far beyond a possibly greater emotional identification with stars like Watts (whose Anna is more sexualized this time) and Roth (whose George is more emotionally vulnerable than Ulrich Muhe's characterization in the original), or a familiarity with past dark performances by Pitt, who has a peculiar gift for sliding inside the minds of nefarious young men with outsized and disturbed intellects. While a non-German listener could at least detect the unctuous irony in the voice of Arno Frisch (who played Paul in the original), there's an entirely greater, more chilling and infinitely funnier impact for the English ear when hearing the same lines delivered by Pitt, or for that matter by Corbet as Peter, who will always be remembered for his disarming explanation of the torture "games" themselves to Anna, George, and Georgie: "You shouldn't forget the importance of entertainment." For a film designed primarily as a visual analysis of how the urges for violence are shared by characters and audiences alike—and as a rebuke to the audience for not recognizing this point—the impact of words in the new *Funny Games* is unexpectedly overwhelming and creates a manifestly American filter through which all else flows.

Of course, this is felt only by those who've seen the original, which leaves out the vast majority of the new film's viewers; there's been a boomlet for the original in North America among those who've caught up with the film on DVD, either in Koch Lorber's release or in Kino's subsequent repackaging, which includes a Haneke interview with critic Serge Toubiana. There's no doubt that this helped convince Warner Independent Pictures (along with producing partner Celluloid Dreams) to finance the remake, a business decision exactly along the lines of other Hollywood remakes of recent Asian extreme home-video hits like *The Ring* (which, in a case of trivia and coincidence gone wild, featured Naomi Watts as star in an English-language redo by the original's director). Put aside this small audience sliver, and the transformational linguistic effect of the new *Funny Games* will be lost on almost all who now see it.

This leads to some new speculations, and new concerns. Since *Funny Games* has been restored to its originally intended form in English and in an American setting (Long Island, to be precise)—a form to match its



George (Tim Roth) and his wife Anna (Naomi Watts) are terrorized by teenage psychopaths Paul (Michael Pitt) and Peter (Brady Corbet) in Michael Haneke's remake of *Funny Games*.

action and ideas—it begs the general question regarding what's missed in the translation when an English-language critic listens to a non-English language film (assuming, for these purposes, that the critic is a dummy in the other language).

Is it possible that critics, and audiences, can be fooled by films not in their native language? Naturally, this applies across all languages, but the framework for the issue is always going to be subjectively based in one's own tongue. Taken a step further, there's the even more subjective effect of how a foreign language sounds to one's ear; while some friends and acquaintances hate the sound of German, for instance, and thus will always have a core problem cozying up to any German film, others adore the language's aural textures and music. It may even be possible that some English-speaking fans of the Austrian *Funny Games* may feel that the new version is missing some edge, especially with Pitt's English, since they may associate German with evil Nazis and how the language has long been satirized in (especially) the U.S.

But another concern with the new *Funny Games* (which Haneke originally wanted to title *Funny Games U.S.*—the title that was on the high-definition video print I saw last September) has nothing to do with linguistics. Haneke discusses whether, at the end of his video interview with Toubiana, the unexpected popularity of the original *Funny Games* on DVD might mean that the film is becoming, perversely, too popular; or at least, more popular than Haneke ever wished a critique of consumerism would be. Is *Funny Games*, he wonders, becoming just another consumer entertainment? Is it destined to be viewed as just another Naomi Watts chiller? Has Warner Independent guaranteed this with its ad poster featuring Watts's big head, with the obvious device of appealing to *Ring* fans? Is the trailer—viewable all over the Web—a kind of con job, since it's nothing more than your basic teaser for a slasher-thriller? Precisely by remaking his film in America, with an American studio indie division, has Haneke unavoidably played right into the studio's game of peddling consumer products? And with all of this in play, as the film is framed and marketed for the North American public, are the expectations and sets of responses to *Funny Games* certain to widen the gap between the manner in which audiences and critics see movies in general, with Haneke's film as a prime example?

All of this and more is not only possible, but certain. The arguably courageous attempt by Haneke to effectively smuggle his polemical work of antigenre into the commercial mainstream of American movies is almost certain to be undone by the very forces he has openly despised, and perhaps no amount of critical explication will reverse it since the movie—by its position inside a genre that it nevertheless wants to subvert—



Naomi Watts stars in *Funny Games*.

is being sold as something that it's not. Apart from the sheer merits of the film—and they are considerable, not only in the ways in which Haneke has brilliantly succeeded in reframing his original work, but in the manner in which his control of the medium has reached awesome heights—that control ends once the film is flung out into the marketplace, where the new *Funny Games* will doubtless be gobbled up and spat out. And Haneke should probably have seen this coming. As the film's ad line says: "You must admit, you brought this on yourself."—Robert Koehler

The Witnesses

Produced by Saïd Ben Saïd; directed by André Téchiné; screenplay by Laurent Guyot, André Téchiné, Viviane Zingg; cinematography by Julien Hirsch; production design by Michèle Abbé; costumes by Radija Zeggai; edited by Martine Giordano; music by Philippe Sarde; starring Emmanuelle Béart, Michel Blanc, Sami Bouajila, Johan Libéreau. Color. 112 mins. Distributed by Strand Releasing.

Veteran French filmmaker André Téchiné's *The Witnesses* is a film dominated by the theme of new arrivals, most fictional and personal, one historical and epidemiological. Over the course of a year in early-Eighties Paris, Sarah (Emmanuelle Béart), an author of children's fiction, attempts to write her first novel for adults; at the same time she and her policeman partner Mehdi (Sami Bouajila) give birth to their first child, an event which places intense strain on their relationship; meanwhile, Manu (Johan Libéreau), a young gay man from the French rural South, moves to the capital, where he strikes up an emotionally intense but sexless relationship with Adrien (Michel Blanc), an older doctor he meets while cruising in a

public park. Overshadowing and intersecting with these private encounters is the arrival of HIV/AIDS in France. The virus starts to claim lives within the Parisian gay community, Manu's among them. He meets Sarah and Mehdi because Adrien is a close friend of the couple, godparent to their infant child; Manu and Mehdi start a clandestine affair ended by the latter's diagnosis as HIV-positive by Adrien; the latter, by virtue of his medical expertise, sexual orientation, and intense emotional attachment to Manu, propels himself into the front line of the initial medical and political responses to a growing pandemic.

Both in terms of the film's subject matter and the cast of characters used to illustrate it, *The Witnesses* can be linked back to several entries in Téchiné's extensive oeuvre. The motif of the naïve arriviste coming to grief in the big city recalls the central character of Pierre in *J'embrasse pas* (1991), while an attempt to narrate private romantic and sexual drama against the backdrop of momentous events in recent French history defined *Les Roseaux sauvages* (1994), a coming-of-age film set during the late Fifties and early Sixties Algerian War of Independence and probably Téchiné's best-known feature internationally. Yet the director's latest is not just of interest for *auteurist* reasons, and it should attract an audience wider than confirmed fans of his work. The broader appeal and significance of *The Witnesses* lies in the fact that it represents one of the most artistically and intellectually accomplished filmic meditations to date on the moral and creative challenges inherent in narrating the history of HIV/AIDS, some quarter of a century after the public arrival of the virus in Western Europe and North America.

What primarily differentiates *The Witnesses* from the first wave of features depicting the human cost of HIV/AIDS in countries like France and the U.S. during the Eighties is the luxury of hindsight. Watch films like Roger Spottiswoode's *And the Band Played On* (1993) or Cyril Collard's *Les Nuits fauves* (1992) again and you are struck by the extraordinary sense of urgency that, quite understandably, dictates their preferred approach to telling the early story of HIV/AIDS. Such films are of their time because they are defined by an all-too-acute awareness that, against a backdrop of contemporaneous societal ignorance and prejudice, time itself was ebbing away for so many. Think of the running, ever-escalating count of HIV/AIDS infections and deaths in the U.S. peppering the transition between scenes in Spottiswoode's movie, or the poignancy of *Les Nuits fauves'* multiaward-winning sweep at the French *Césars* a few days after the HIV-related death of Collard, the film's writer, director, and star—a man who told a semifictionalized version of his own life story only just in time. Unlike such works, however, *The Witnesses* is characterized by its overriding fascination with the



From left, Mehdi (Sami Bouajila), Sarah (Emmanuelle Béart), Manu (Johan Libéreau) and Adrien (Michel Blanc) are the protagonists in André Téchiné's *The Witnesses*.

questions of how best and why to tell the story of HIV/AIDS, a story which is now both historical and contemporary, rather than one propelled forward by an immediate need to tell the tale even as it unfolds and while there is still time.

Téchiné's evenhanded consideration of *how* as well as *what* to tell determines *The Witnesses*' ostentatiously flagged three-act dramatic structure (defined by different seasons of the year—summer, winter, and spring). It also dictates the distinctive dramatic and thematic concerns of these three acts. Only the first is primarily concerned with story, the profusion of event and effect, portentous things happening to a small group of people. By the end of the opening third, the film's drama is, in some ways, already over; at the very least, viewers can be in little doubt as to where events are tending. Adrien is smitten by Manu, who in no way reciprocates; Manu is diagnosed HIV-positive; Mehdi has been forced to reconsider his sexual identity, and Sarah her maternal equivalent.

If this introduction establishes more or less everything that does or will happen to the film's central characters, the latter two acts can be seen as much more concerned with narratology than narrative, far more excited by the spectacle of Adrien, Manu, and Sarah struggling to create coherent accounts—both for themselves and for others, for their contemporaries and for posterity—of the felt impact and significance of their individual parts in the story of HIV/AIDS. In all three cases, Téchiné proposes that the urgency of telling this historical story is matched only by the task's complexity. Adrien's pioneering medical research, for instance, poses both questions of pathology and propaganda. Hand-in-hand with the challenge of understanding the structure, spread, and action of the HIV virus goes the task of passing that information to the general population in a fashion

that is comprehensible but not unduly provoking—whether of mass panic or indifference (a challenge still very much with us today). Analogously, discovering his affair with her partner only after it has ended, Sarah forgives Manu, and, in the process, changes both the subject and structuring literary approach of her novel. Titled—significantly enough—*The Newcomer*, its original, autobiographical focus (the story of a new mother who discovers that she is not especially maternal) is replaced by a broader, self-effacing, testimonial successor, as Sarah attempts to preserve in fictional form the remnants of Manu's identity and short life story, taking inspiration from the Dictaphone tapes he records in the final months of his life.

Like Sarah's fictional novel, *The Witnesses*, at first sight, seems intimate indeed, classically novelistic in character and scope. Not by coincidence, given Téchiné's fascination

with exploring the storytelling process as much as the story told through it, the film's opening scene shows Sarah at work on her typewriter. What subsequently unfolds is thus understandable in part as a filmic transcription of the novel she is writing. The boundaries between fictional character's book and material creator's film are purposefully blurred, not the least by the occasional intrusion of a voice-over, which presents Sarah as omniscient narrator. Both *The Newcomer* and *The Witnesses* focus on a small cluster of interrelated lives (re)created, in significant part, from their respective creators' private imagination and perspective; both are concerned with the variously blossoming and imploding romantic, sexual, and familial relations that evolve.

Admittedly, some may see such maneuvers as cute rather than complex, and the exceptionally tight domestic framing of *The Witnesses*' central narrative and cast will revive occasional charges that Téchiné is prone towards the novelette-ish, a purveyor of vaguely superior Gallic soap opera and little more. It's certainly true that on occasion the sheer self-awareness of story structure and content tends towards the glib. The irony that homosexual Adrien ultimately proves a far more selfless surrogate parent to near-dead Manu than the heterosexual Sarah does to her just-born biological child is a little too pat, for instance. Yet ultimately such lapses (more characteristic, after all, of a first-time novelist like Sarah than an old hand such as Téchiné) prove the exception rather than the rule. For Sarah *The Newcomer* represents innovation, a new method to and rationale behind her desire to tell stories; for her creator *The Witnesses* is an act of reiteration, a further refinement of Téchiné's longstanding urge to creatively explore the blurred boundaries between autobiography and history, sexual and social politics within the France of his lifetime, and to seek



Sarah (Emmanuelle Béart) tells her friends' story in a novel as a means of offering witness to the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in France in the Eighties in Téchiné's *The Witnesses*.

out sufficiently flexible storytelling structures and techniques that allow him to do so.

Given the fascination exhibited by this movie with the literary as structuring motif, and the ambiguous lines of demarcation between Sarah's written fiction and Téchiné's visual one, it should perhaps come as no surprise that *The Witnesses* can be usefully compared not simply to earlier HIV/AIDS films, but also to notable works of creative literature about the pandemic, as well as moving image works, which explore the idea of the literary per se. Téchiné's use of melodrama as a way to engage as wide an audience as possible with recent historical events, his careful choice of characters and their interrelations to emphasise the HIV/AIDS pandemic as a phenomenon significant across received categories of sexual orientation, and his measured, strategic flouting of "good" narrative technique recalls nothing so much as the approach of Armistead Maupin across the *Tales of the City* novel cycle. Téchiné flags the respective fates of his central characters 'too soon' in order to engage his audience with some of the historiographical and moral challenges posed by the urge to remember the early years of the pandemic. Maupin, writing through that time, killed off apparently central characters in the gaps between the novels to communicate a sense of grief, disorientation, and bewilderment. He deployed quasi-Dickensian nets of outrageous coincidence throughout the *Tales* cycle, bringing seemingly unlinked and unlinkable fictional characters into contact with each other, in order to emphasize the import of HIV/AIDS for as many sections of contemporary society as he possibly could.

Moreover, in seeking to appreciate the challenge Téchiné understands himself to face in *The Witnesses*, we might look no further than Marc Forster's entertaining literary meta-comedy *Stranger Than Fiction* (2006). Towards the end of that film, a writer confronts a challenge as much moral as it is creative, when she discovers that the central character of her novel-in-progress is no longer just fictional, but living, breathing flesh-and-blood—no longer merely an imaginative plaything to be manipulated at will for dramatically pleasing effect. It's a negative image of this particular dilemma that both the subject matter of *The Witnesses* and the point in time from which he examines it pose for Téchiné: what are the responsibilities of an artist who tells the stories of those who once walked among us but now exist primarily in the realms of narrative, whether of private memory or public fiction? As its title suggests, *The Witnesses* is a film that understands itself as testimony rather than (or as well as) story. Consequently, it takes as its primary duty the need to ask how best to remember, rather than how best to affect—its considerable artistic achievement lies in the fact that it manages to do both.—Jonathan Murray

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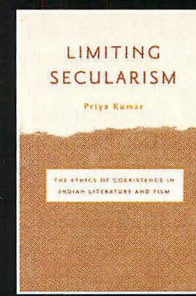
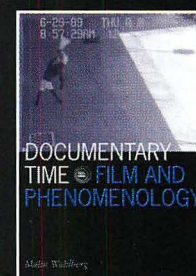
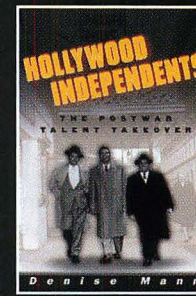
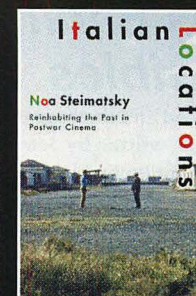
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DVD REVIEWS

Les Enfants terribles

Produced and directed by Jean-Pierre Melville; written by Jean Cocteau; cinematography by Henri Decaë; edited by Monique Bonnot; starring Nicole Stéphane, Edouard Dermithe, Renée Cosima, Melvyn Martin, Maria Cyliakus, Jean-Marie Robain and Jacques Bernard. DVD, B&W, 107 mins., in French with optional English subtitles, 1950. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterionco.com, distributed by Image Entertainment, www.image-entertainment.com.

Jean-Pierre Melville knew from the start that directing *Les Enfants terribles*, adapted by Jean Cocteau from his own 1929 novel, would complicate his status as an emerging force in French cinema. Melville was a relative newcomer with only one feature to his credit, while Cocteau was a celebrated *artiste* who had directed several films and written quite a few more. A chronic overachiever in all kinds of fields, Cocteau was also a poet, an essayist, a jazz drummer, a prolific painter and sketcher, a journalist who often paid the bills with newspaper and magazine pieces, and the manager of a prizefighter who made a comeback under his guiding hand. Melville produced, directed, and designed *Les Enfants terribles*, but Cocteau wrote the script, spoke the narration, and possessed the bigger name, so it seemed inevitable that audiences would see it as his film.

Foreseeing this pitfall, Melville launched a counteroffensive in the opening credits. In the background appears a classical Greek temple under a stormy sky, and in the foreground appear the letters of Melville's name, popping up one at a time, each welcomed by the clang of a cheery bell, until his monicker is complete, ceremoniously crowned with an oversized M made out of celluloid. Whatever you think of the movie, you're going to remember that name!

The film became a classic, of course, and Melville became a name to conjure with, even though Cocteau wasn't shy about grabbing as much credit as he could, for work on the production and for dreaming up the wickedly eccentric story in the first place. The eponymous main characters are Paul and Elisabeth, a teenage brother and sister who were born to raise hell, especially with each other. During a schoolboy romp outside Paul's school, an alluring lad named Dargelos hurls a snowball that hits him in the heart—one of the most moving



Elisabeth (Nichole Stéphane) and Paul (Edouard Dermithe) as the eponymous teenage brother and sister in *Les Enfants terribles* (1950) (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

metaphors I know for the sudden onslaught of a love that dare not speak its name, and one that Cocteau used more than once in his copious body of work. The school sends Paul home so Elisabeth can nurse him back to health, and the siblings seize the opportunity to delve more deeply than ever into what they call "The Game," a shifting set of private signals and activities that shields them from the tedious outside world. Hunkered down in their deliriously messy bedroom, they nurture their emotionally (and perhaps physically) incestuous bond, interacting with only a handful of others—rich kid Gérard; fashion model Agathe, attractive to Paul because she looks like Dargelos; and a wealthy American whom Elisabeth briefly marries. The psychosexual tensions grow ever higher, until an unexpected package sent by Dargelos opens the way to a grim conclusion.

Melville and Cocteau both made crucial contributions to *Les Enfants terribles*, but cinephiles have never tired of sorting through it for evidence that one man or the other was its true *auteur*. While this is still an open issue, critical opinion has tended away from Melville in recent years. Among the extras on The Criterion Collection's new release are conversations with two French experts, critic Jean Narboni and scholar Dominique Païni, who emphatically agree that Cocteau completely held the reins.

This won't please Melville admirers who see the darksome poetry of *Les Enfants terribles* as an edgy prototype for the visual dynamics of *Bob le flambeur* (1956) and *Le Cercle rouge* (1970) and especially *Le Samouraï* (1967), probably his masterpiece. But it's a fact that Cocteau hovered around the set almost continually; that his drawings inspired much of the movie's visual design; that Nicole Stéphane looked exactly right to embody Elisabeth as Cocteau envisioned her; and that Cocteau managed to land the other starring role for Edouard Dermithe, who'd been his gardener before becoming his handsome lover and dubiously talented protégé.

Yet other facts support an opposite view: Melville cast actress Renée Cosima in the dual role of Dargelos and Agathe despite Cocteau's passionate insistence that Dargelos be played by a boy; Melville chose music by Bach and Vivaldi instead of the jazz Cocteau wanted; Cocteau followed Melville's orders to the letter when the ailing director let him take over the shooting for a day; and Melville successfully banned Cocteau from the studio after the latter impulsively yelled "Cut!" in a panic over Dermithe's mediocre acting. Perhaps most important, Melville rejected the ending Cocteau wanted—Paul and Elisabeth exalted side by side in easeful death—in favor of a more sensational finale that has less of Cocteau's 1946 *Beauty and the Beast* about it.

Although it seems to me on balance that the Cocteau camp wins the authorship war, I'm not doctrinaire about this—the important thing is the film's manifest excellence, not the arguments over who contributed what. Viewers who enjoy those arguments can search out fresh evidence via the first-rate Criterion edition, but I'd advise them not to search in the program essay by Gary Indiana, which has a few good passages but falls short of Criterion's usually high standard. It's true that *Les Enfants terribles* has a lithe and energetic rhythm, for instance, but comparing it to “a Marx Brothers movie” is so uproariously off the mark that Groucho, Harpo, Jean, and Jean-Pierre must all be rolling in their graves. A few lines later we read about “resistant Melville and *collabo* Cocteau,” recycling a slur against Cocteau that I thought nobody still believed. Then we're told that Melville caved to Cocteau's demand that the picture take place in 1950 instead of 1929, whereas Melville's actual way of calming Cocteau down was to “leave the period undefined,” as you can see on the screen and also read in the interview book *Melville on Melville*—in fact, you can read it in the very same Criterion booklet, where the pertinent quotation is reprinted in a different section.

The commentary track by author Gilbert Adair has a lot more to offer, although he doesn't get to mentioning that some of his books were the basis for Bernardo Bertolucci's 2003 drama *The Dreamers*, which cribbs from *Les Enfants terribles* in all kinds of ways, from the sensual brother-sister relationship to the construction of a quasisacred space where sexual pressures build to a climax. Also supporting Cocteau's authorship, Adair points out the frequency of double close-ups in *Les Enfants terribles*—two faces in a single frame, their contrasting expres-

sions speaking volumes about the invisible souls within—and notes the statuesque aura of the main characters, who are often seen in Cocteau's favorite poses. He charts the mesmerizing visual tone achieved by legendary cinematographer Henri Decaë, then at the beginning of his career, using white as the prevailing shade even though the imagery grows progressively darker as the film proceeds. And he makes the important point that Paul and Elisabeth are star-crossed lovers, not because they come from different families like Romeo and Juliet, but because they come from the *same* family, which makes their love even more forbidden than the sub-rosa bond between Paul and Dargelos that sets the story in motion. Adair sees the incest theme as Cocteau's recurrent vehicle for exploring proscribed passions without drawing attention to his own homosexuality. Whether or not that's correct, Adair has just the right word for the Paul-and-Elisabeth romance, notwithstanding the small difference in their ages: twincest.

Les Enfants terribles still strikes me as the best of Melville's many excellent works, and also the best movie written by Cocteau except for his own *Orphée*, filmed earlier the same year. (Adair credits Cocteau with the screenplay for *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* in 1945, but he mostly supplied dialog for Bresson's scenario.) As a faithful adaptation of a novel published just as modernism was moving from its explosive Twenties phase to a more accessible and politicized second stage, the film artfully blends Cocteau's beloved symbolism and neoclassicism with realist techniques (location shooting, proto-New Wave spontaneity) and stunning surrealistic moments, as when Gérard's face looms near the camera while the rest of the *mise-en-scène* recedes

into the distance like a rapidly fading dream. And we can all be grateful that Melville prevailed over Cocteau in their squabble over the score; the pitch-perfect mix of Bach and Vivaldi is unquestionably what Pauline Kael called it, “one of the rare effective film usages of great music.”

This is also one of the rare films to combine openly theatrical devices (the surrealistically receding room, for instance) with the kind of jumpy, on-the-go camerawork that Decaë would so brilliantly execute for the likes of François Truffaut and Claude Chabrol a few years later. At once a mature masterpiece and an *enfant terrible* of a movie, the Melville-Cocteau masterpiece looks as wondrous today as it ever did.—
David Sterritt

American Silent Horror Collection

A box set of 5 DVDs, including *The Penalty* (directed by Wallace Woosley, color tinted, 93 mins., 1920); *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (directed by John S. Robertson, color tinted, 73 mins., 1920); *The Cat and the Canary* (directed by Paul Leni, color tinted, 80 mins., 1927); *The Man Who Laughs* (directed by Paul Leni, color tinted, 110 mins., 1928); and *The Kingdom of Shadows* (directed by Bret Wood, 70 mins., 1998). A Kino Release, www.kino.com.

Perhaps the most curious—even mysterious—aspect of this excellent collection is its title: American Silent Horror Collection. Technically, at least by our contemporary definitions, none of the films here qualifies as a “horror” film. Certainly Paul Leni's powerful *The Man Who Laughs*, based on the novel by Victor Hugo, is a historical drama with a strong social-justice message. Leni's *The Cat and the Canary* is one of the first film versions of the “old dark house” genre and, while scary, is, at heart, a mystery. Wallace Woosley's *The Penalty* is a highly sexualized revenge drama and while Lon Chaney plays a criminally insane amputee, there is no real “horror” here. John S. Robertson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* comes closest to what audiences have considered a “horror” film, and while Stevenson's novella has been a favorite in Hollywood—this 1920 version is the fourth time Hollywood tackled the story; there were also two other versions that same year—the power of the piece resides in its exploration of the darker aspects of human nature, not in the supernatural or even extreme violence, both of which might be used to cobble together some workable definition of “horror.” No doubt Kino needed a marketing angle to gather these five estimable films together and “horror” is both general enough and sexy enough a genre monicker to use.

This is not to say that these films are radically eclectic or so vastly dissimilar as to have no connection. On the contrary,



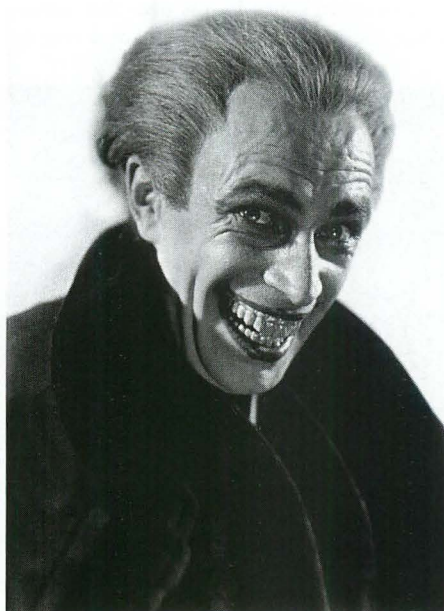
The prolonged childhood relationship of Elisabeth and Paul comes to a tragic end in Jean Cocteau and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Les Enfants terribles* (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

viewed as a group these four silent films give us a clear and very visceral idea not only of the enormous impact that German expressionism had on early Hollywood films, but also how influential both the Broadway, and the American regional stage, was to the formation of narrative and performance in early American film.

The impact of German expressionism on Hollywood moviemaking has been extensively detailed by film historians, and certainly here the clearest, most striking, example of this are Paul Leni's *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) and *The Man Who Laughs* (1928). This is obviously because Leni—who came to Hollywood in 1927 to work at Universal and died two years later after completing four films—already had a career in German cinema and theater (he worked as a set designer for Max Reinhardt) and his 1924 *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*), which he codirected with Leo Birinsky and stars Emil Jannings, Conrad Veidt, and Werner Krauss, is considered a seminal work of early cinema fantasy. The connections here to a wide range of German expressionism fantasy films are myriad.

Not only did Leni direct *Waxworks* but both Conrad Veidt and Werner Krauss also had a long involvement with similar projects, most specifically Robert Weine's 1920 *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* in which Krauss played the title character and Veidt the murderous somnambulist Caesar. That same year as *Caligari*, Veidt starred in F.W. Murnau's now lost *Der Januskopf*, an adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (that also featured Bela Lugosi as his manservant) and in 1926 played the lead in Henrik Galeen's *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*) in which he costarred with Werner Krauss.

Given this complex set of relationships of personalities, esthetics, and social conditions, it is not surprising that Leni brings a distinct vision to both *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Man Who Laughs*. What is amazing, however, is to see how differently Leni uses these techniques in two very different films. *The Cat and the Canary* began as a Broadway play by John Willard and although it ran for 148 performances (a reasonably successful run for the time), it had a long life with touring and regional companies across the country. Originally presented as a straightforward melodrama—beautiful young woman and a group of quirky relatives must spend a night in a desolate, and seemingly haunted, old house in order to discover who inherits the deceased uncle's fortune—Leni and the play's adapters Alfred A. Cohn and Robert F. Hill have shifted the focus here from overt drama to essentially a parody of the genre. While it is certainly possible to see very direct references to earlier expressionist films—shots of Laura La Plante, as the endangered young woman, in her bed vividly recall similar images of Lili Dagover in *Caligari* and many of Leni's exaggerated camera angles to convey emo-



Top to bottom: Lon Chaney as the criminally insane amputee in Wallace Woosley's *The Penalty* (1920); John Barrymore in John S. Robertson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920); and Conrad Veidt in Paul Leni's *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) (photos courtesy of Kino Video).

tional disorientation are very reminiscent of Galeen's work in *Der Student von Prag*—Leni's focus here is less psychological than parodic and humorous. It's clear that the material here—a scant five years after the Broadway show—has already become culturally trite and Leni is creatively using expressionist techniques to elicit knowing laughs rather than to evoke terror and pity.

Using much of the same sensibility a year later in *The Man Who Laughs*, Leni creates a completely different experience. Victor Hugo's 1869 novel about political intrigue in seventeenth-century England is a melodramatic, but highly readable, attack on the inhumanity of the aristocracy. Gwynplaine, the son of a British Peer (who has been murdered by the king for political reasons), has his face deformed by gypsies in such a fashion that he always appears to have a hideous grin. After becoming a traveling player and falling in love with a blind girl, he is ultimately restored to his family's social position only to find his new role in life untenable and commits suicide. Blanche Oelrichs (under her pseudonym Michael Strange) had in 1921 written a moderately unsuccessful stage version, titled *Clair de Lune*, of the novel as a vehicle for her husband John Barrymore. There had been talk of Barrymore filming this—he had just made a film of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* the year earlier—but that never happened. The Leni version, with a script by the prolific screenwriter J. Grubb Alexander (who would later pen Barrymore's famous role in the 1932 *Svengali*) reorders the structure of the novel, getting rid of Hugo's complicated flashbacks, making it a straightforward narrative, and also gives it an unlikely happy ending. The result jettisoned some of Hugo's explicit political arguments, but makes for a stronger, more direct, story.

What is so compelling here, however, is how Leni—who only the year before used expressionist techniques to parody outmoded stage narratives and conventions—brings them full force here to convey not just the pain of human suffering, but also (albeit less than Hugo does) to make a strong statement about political corruption and its capacity for atrocity. While the intense interiority of German expressionism is present here—the claustrophobic scenes between Veidt's Gwynplaine and Olga Baclanova's calculating Duchess Josiana, who must marry him for his title—are rife with unsettling emotions, it is often the more expansive, often exterior, camera work that is overwhelmingly impressive. Early in the film the child Gwynplaine (Julius Molnar, Jr.) is staggering through a blizzard and comes across a hill with corpses swinging on gallows, and at the foot of the hill he finds a mother frozen to death still holding her barely living child. The image is staggering, and demonstrates Leni's superb adaptation of expressionist techniques to new material and social conditions.

While the impact of German expressionism on Hollywood is best seen in Leni's film, it is also evident, in a more modified form, in Wallace Woosley's *The Penalty* and John S. Robertson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Certainly the sequences in *The Penalty* in which the Blizzard, the legless villain played by Lon Chaney, is sexually degrading Rose (Ethel Grey Terry), an undercover police agent who begins to have feelings for him, are as unnerving, and even distasteful, as any of the sexualized sequences in Lang's *Metropolis* or Murnau's *Nosferatu*. But the most salient aspects of these two films are not the camera work per se, but rather the performances. To a large degree the performers in the Leni films are in the service of the director's visual imagination. While Laura La Plante and Conrad Veidt are certainly fine actors, they are subsumed by Leni's vision. This is far less true of Lon Chaney or John Barrymore, both of whom had a history of solid stage performances that completely influenced their film work. Watching *The Penalty* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, it is impossible not to consider the enormous influence that American stage acting and stagecraft had upon early Hollywood.

The power of *The Penalty*—which has the wildly improbable plot of a deranged mobster bent on revenge and planning on destroying San Francisco with the help of anarchists, but who reforms after a brain operation—resides not in Woosley's direction but in Chaney's creepy, highly sexualized performance. While Chaney is working in his usual extreme physical style (here wearing a series of straps that reduce his legs to stumps that end at the knee), it is his sex-

ual magnetism that propels the performance. Without Chaney *The Penalty* would probably be ludicrous, and it is difficult to imagine what other actor at the time might have been able to bring a similar sexual gravity and danger to the role. His performance here is far closer to his work in *The Monster* (1924) and *The Unknown* (1927) than to his more famous roles in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) or *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) since he is relying on a deep, socially disruptive psychological malevolence that is simply missing from Eric or Quasimodo.

While Chaney ends up a "nice guy" at the end of the film—which, after all of its narrative nonsense still manages to have a trick ending—he is unrelentingly depraved throughout most of the movie. This stands in sharp contrast not only to Barrymore's Dr. Jekyll (who is a "nice guy") but also to his Mr. Hyde as well. Chaney's acting, perfected on stage, works seamlessly in film. This is less true of John Barrymore. Here, and in many of his earlier films, we can see Barrymore's stage technique continually trump both the director's vision as well as the script. It's not necessarily a bad thing, and the reality is that the role already had a long history on the American stage. While Barrymore never played it on Broadway—that was mostly the domain of producer and actor Richard Mansfield who revived the role at least six times in New York at the turn of the century—his acting here is clearly bound up with his stage performance. Nevertheless, the effect here is continually striking—Barrymore uses little makeup for his transformation—and the genius of the

performance is that it is a unusually sympathetic.

Except for *The Cat and the Canary*—which only has a set of stills from the finished film—the "extras" on this box set are excellent. *The Man Who Laughs* features a twenty-minute documentary on the making of the film as well as rare footage of Veidt at home in Hollywood with luminaries such as Greta Garbo. There is also a short excerpt from the Italian release with colored title cards and a long excerpt from Hugo's novel—which unfortunately does not give a good sense of the work's complexity. The bonus tracks on *The Penalty* are a real treat—there are several trailers from Chaney films as well as the surviving footage from *The Miracle Man* (1919) and a 1914 one-reel Western, *By the Sun's Rays*. For the diehard Chaney fan there is also an essay that offers a selected scene-by-scene comparison of the original novel by Gouverneur Morris to the shooting script and then the finished film.

The big payoffs here are "extras" on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that feature a 1925 one-reel comic feature with Stan Laurel titled *Dr. Pickle and Mr. Pride* as well as an excerpt from the 1920 "rival" version starring Sheldon Lewis. There is also an illustrated essay detailing Stevenson's inspirations for the story and a brief tour through its many stage and screen versions. Last—and while this is the fifth disc here and not specifically an "extra"—the set features a seventy-minute documentary written and directed by Brett Wood and narrated by Rod Steiger titled *Kingdom of Shadows*. An idiosyncratic history of the horror film, it is filled with an amazing assortment of over fifty clips from movies and makes some fascinating connections between the psychology of religious belief and the rise of the horror film. Most of the content here, however, seems to run counter to why Kino would advertise these specific films as the "American Silent Horror Collection."

In the end, while the beautifully restored prints of these fine films are justification enough for their release—no matter what the collection's title—the American Silent Horror Collection forces us to rethink elements of the genre itself. If, arguably these five films are *not* horror films—than what are? Murnau's *Nosferatu*? Of course. Tod Browning's *Dracula*? Yes. James Whale's *Frankenstein*? But is this science fiction? Tod Browning's *Freaks*? Now, that's a good question—or is *Freaks* simply in a category of its own? Our contemporary cinema offers a wide range of "horror" films from the endless *Friday the 13ths* to Alejandro Amenábar's classy *The Others* or M. Night Shyamalan's oddly effective *The Sixth Sense*—but these feel so far from the films in this Kino collection as for there to be only a distantly recognizable connection. Perhaps the "horror" genre is so protean and eclectic that its appellation to these five classics is perfectly appropriate.—Michael Bronski



Laura La Plante (Annabelle West) gets a fright in this scene from Paul Leni's *The Cat and the Canary* (1927), one of the first films in the "old dark house" genre (photo courtesy of Kino Video).

I Am Cuba:

The Ultimate Edition

Directed by Mikhail Kalatozov; a three-DVD box set, including *I Am Cuba*, B&W, 141 min., 1964; *The Siberian Mammoth*, directed by Vicente Ferraz, color, 91 min., 2005; and *A Film about Mikhail Kalatozov*, directed by Mikhail Kalatozishvili, color and B&W, 120 mins., 2006. Released by Milestone Film & Video, www.milestonefilms.com.

I Am Cuba is a cinematic revelation that appeared thirty years late and tells the tale of revolution that never occurred. Mikhail Kalatozov's fever dream of a picture is the product of the heady days of the early 1960s. De-Stalinization was the order of the day in the Soviet Union and a popular Communist uprising had broken out ninety miles from American shores. Cuba was the center of attention for the international left. Luminaries like Chris Marker, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Agnès Varda descended on the island to see the revolution for themselves. Arriving along with them were scores of Soviet advisors, bureaucrats, and technicians who brought boatloads of Soviet money to aid the cause.

I Am Cuba was conceived as a coproduction of Mosfilm and the newly created Cuban film organization, ICAIC. Kalatozov headed up the project and brought along his cinematographer, Sergei Urusevsky, who had recently shot the Palme d'Or winning *Cranes are Flying* for him. The film's writers were the renowned Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and the Cuban novelist and playwright Enrique Pineda Barnet. The bittersweet guitar songs and score that create so much of the film's atmosphere were the work of Cuban composer, Carlos Fariñas. Sergio Corrieri, who would come to the

world's attention in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), stars in the film. The visual brilliance of the film, its multicultural background, and its strange path from rejection and obscurity to its unlikely rebirth decades later, are beautifully documented in Milestone's new DVD box set, *I Am Cuba: The Ultimate Edition*.

Kalatozov and his collaborators wanted to capture the revolution as it was happening. It was meant to celebrate Castro's victory, as well as spur his progress and raise the audience's radical consciousness. The style that Kalatozov and Urusevsky use privileges extremely long takes, wide-angle lenses, and hand-held camera work. Their techniques reflect a change of emphasis in Soviet cinema that had occurred since Stalin. Repudiating the montage-heavy style of the great Soviet filmmakers of the Twenties, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, for whom editing, the dynamic juxtaposition of shots, was meant to replicate the dialectical process that undergirds Marxist thought, Stalin and the Soviet authorities dismissed montage as intellectual formalism. Instead, they wanted to use their state-funded film apparatus as a means of control, enforcing a more direct, linear, and staid film style—Socialist Realism. By the 1960s, after Stalin's death, filmmakers began to stretch and expand this style. Following another line of Marxist philosophy, long takes, mobile framing, and an intense concentration on the contents of the shot reveal the material reality of the world that allows the viewer to see it in a new way, far beyond everyday life.

One can trace this history of Soviet images in the work of Kalatozov, who was an active filmmaker since the 1920s, on disc three of the box set, which contains a documentary tribute to the filmmaker by his grandson, Mikhail Kalatozishvili. This is in

fact its chief asset. While the interviews of friends and admirers are predictably laudatory and not particularly insightful, Kalatozishvili packs the film with his grandfather's images, often including extended sequences. It is fascinating to note the continuities in his style and approach to particular subjects and ideas. Particularly striking is his dramatic use of long shots to dramatize landscapes and pointed manipulation of the horizon, using cloudy skies and rugged land to illustrate the relationship between the people in his films and their environment. Throughout his work, the camera moves in time to the psychological states of his protagonists.

Kalatozishvili ends his film with a flurry of images from all of Kalatozov's films grouped by theme. In one sequence, we see a striking scene from *Salt for Svanetia*, Kalatozov's 1930 chronicle of a remote Soviet area, where the camera mimics the motion of a laborer's body pounding a salt boulder. The next image is from thirty years hence, from *I Am Cuba*, where a frantically dipping and twisting hand-held camera follows the frenzied movement of a peasant's machete as he wildly cuts through a field of sugar cane. We see in this sequence that Kalatozov has managed to return to the style of dialectical montage, banned so long ago.

Such sensual, impressionistic, and stirring passages are at the heart of *I Am Cuba*. Not designed to be a cohesive narrative, but an agitprop, epic poem, the film is divided into four vignettes. The first depicts the moral corruption and exploitation of the Batista years, the second is a portrait of the countryside and the wretched inequities of the sugar trade, the third dramatizes the student protest movement in the cities, and the fourth takes us back to the country and the hills, from which Castro and his guerrillas



American sailors harass a Cuban woman on the sinful streets of Havana in the Batista-era sequence in Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba* (photo courtesy of Photofest).



A peasant farmer destroys his sugar cane crop in defiance of the United Fruit Company in *I Am Cuba* (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Mikhail Kalatozov, cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky and their crew film the student demonstration sequence in *I Am Cuba* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

launched their armed rebellion. The simple melodramatic plots that hold the four parts together are merely excuses for the elaborate sequences and visual experimentation, which are clearly the film's emphasis.

The most famous and imitated set pieces are the amazingly choreographed sequence shots of the pre-Castro Havana hotel, the endless hand-held shot of the funeral of a martyred student, and the sugar-cane cutting scene described earlier. The funeral scene is a single shot that begins at ground level with the coffin, but then the camera climbs up to the top of a building, moves through a cigar factory on the top floor of a building, and then projects outward over a growing crowd in the street. It keeps moving, ever outward, impossibly suspended over the mourners and the coffin draped with the new Cuban flag. It's a thrilling sight; our emotions are heightened through the style of the shot. The camera's tenuous position, but indefatigable forward progression, mirrors the peaceful students' defiance of the armed soldiers and the upward progression of the shot parallels the people's awakening.

The Havana hotel scene is also comprised of a single take. The camera climbs up several stories, passes through a beauty contest and a jazz band, gets drunk with some American tourists, and then cools off with them by diving into a pool. This breathtaking shot is meant to capture the crass, dizzy, dream world lived by the colonial exploiters and Batista cronies who ruled Cuba until December 1959. It is juxtaposed with scenes of the poverty and want of the Cuban people. But you don't remember those scenes quite as well, and it looks like they are having a lot of fun on that roof of that hotel. The life of the oppressors, so stunningly captured by Kalatozov, didn't

seem so bad, even if it was morally and politically dubious. This was an objection that the Soviet authorities had as well. The ambiguity of this scene speaks to the film's greatest failing. Kalatozov and his Soviet collaborators had very little *feel* for Cuba. On a fundamental level the island that appears in the film is a picturesque tropical paradise filled with innocent and simple natives and crudely drawn Anglo oppressors. Coming from the cold, harsh, and bureaucratized environment of Stalin's Soviet Union, it must have been very hard to comprehend the struggle and challenges faced by the Cubans, newly victorious on their sunlit isle.

The helicopter shot that opens the film introduces us to the female narrator who is the voice of the island. The camera—filled with infrared film that makes the palm trees appear to be gilded—surveys a completely uninhabited section of the island as the narrator quotes Columbus, praising Cuba's natural beauty. It is disappointing to see Soviet filmmakers reiterating the old saw that history in the Western hemisphere began with Columbus and the all too familiar gendering of "virgin" land as feminine. Melodrama, defined as pitting simple innocence against injustice and evil, is the organizing principle of each vignette. The Cuban characters all have soulful faces and white shirts, while the Americans and wealthy Cubans are all sneering, brutal exploiters. Kalatozov and his collaborators were on the island during the Cuban missile crisis and the experience hardened them towards the U.S. Nevertheless, the politics and characterizations in the film are strident and unconvincing and too typical of run-of-the-mill propaganda films, cheapening the poetry and invention of the images.

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Cubans and Soviets, the film was poorly received in both countries and was shelved for nearly thirty years. Its rejection is interestingly chronicled on the second disc, *The Siberian Mammoth*, a Brazilian documentary by Vicente Ferraz, who returns to Cuba to find the actors and collaborators on *I Am Cuba*. Ferraz captures both the Cubans' disappointment with the film and sympathetically exposes the Soviets' blind spots. Amazingly, the film was so ignored in Cuba that many of the collaborators do not even remember the most basic details about its production. They are genuinely surprised when they learn of the film's 1990 revival. In that year Tom Luddy of the Pacific Film Archive and the Telluride Film Festival showed *I Am Cuba* to Martin Scorsese and Francis Coppola with the hope that they would get it distributed. He was successful in this and the directors, who became strong advocates for the film, are responsible for its rejuvenated status today. Scorsese gives an eloquent disquisition on the film in one of the DVD extras.

The charm of *I Am Cuba* is that it is like finding a time capsule. The film's optimism, its belief in Cuba and its revolution, hope for Soviet-Cuban cooperation, and desire to spread the Communist word are touching in their sincerity and naiveté. The film and its characters will never see the dark side of Castro, Soviet aid dry up, or the island starved by the U.S. embargo. What remains vital and what inspires audiences when they see the film is the way in which the filmmakers use the language of cinema to make an audience feel and think. The audacity of the long shots, the inventiveness with which each sequence is put together, the very idea of making a filmed epic poem, have lost none of their impact over the years. The film is one long passionate plea in favor of form over content and an affirmation of the transcendence of film style.—Rahul Hamid

The Milky Way

Directed by Luis Buñuel; screenplay by Luis Buñuel and Jean Claude-Carrière; produced by Serge Silberman; photography by Christian Matras; music by Luis Buñuel; starring Laurent Terzieff, Paul Frankeur and Delphine Seyrig. DVD, color, French dialog with English subtitles, 101 mins., 1969. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterionco.com, distributed by Image Entertainment, www.image-entertainment.com.

Throughout his long film career, Luis Buñuel kept the Catholic Church in his sights as a favorite object of excoriating lampoon. But the sacrileges periodically perpetrated by the director in works from *L'Âge d'or* to *Viridiana*, along with the more intensive immersion in all matters holy in *Nazarin* and *Simón of the Desert*, seem like a warmup for *The Milky Way* (*La Voie lactée*), which appeared in 1969. Buñuel was nearing

seventy when he shot the film, and one can see the change from the younger artist whose greatest impulse was to draw moustaches on every sacred cow in his path. *The Milky Way*, for all its mischief making, is the product of genuine curiosity about the faith in which Buñuel was raised, and about the human impulse to belief in general. Nearly forty years on, the movie has retained much of its ability to confound and outrage, but also to incite a more complex response.

The loose, picaresque structure devised by Buñuel and coscenarist Jean-Claude Carrière for *The Milky Way* is that of two modern-day pilgrims (played by Laurent Terzieff and Paul Frankeur) on the route of the title, from Rue Saint-Jacques in Paris to the shrine of St. James in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Along the road, the pilgrims—really just tramps who intend to sell *faux* relics to the faithful at their destination—run across a variety of figures who illustrate a history of Catholic heresies and debate central mysteries like the Holy Trinity and transubstantiation. The unities are not respected, to put it mildly: the pilgrimage takes detours into medieval Europe and ancient Palestine, and the tramps count the Marquis de Sade, the Virgin Mary, Satan, and Jesus himself among their fellow travelers.

What's striking is how completely Buñuel stays on topic in *The Milky Way*. A maître d' and his staff in a contemporary restaurant are as embroiled in religious discourse as Jesus and his apostles or, in a more obscure reference, the fourth-century ascetic Priscillian and his followers. For non-Catholics (or, presumably, Catholics who are not themselves religious scholars), some of this can get confusing, even tedious. When a Jesuit and a Jansenist heretic debate orthodoxy while dueling, only a small percentage

of the film's viewers can be expected to understand their differences. To Buñuel, a native of the Inquisition's birthplace, this is probably beside the point—the fact that these arcane matters can inspire such fervor is what fascinates him, and tickles his absurdist fancy.

The extras on The Criterion Collection's DVD release of *The Milky Way* effectively act as a study guide to the film. In the documentary *Luis Buñuel: Atheist Thanks to God*, Carrière, Terzieff, Bernard Verley (who embodied the movie's very robust Jesus), and other participants recall working on the film, and give their impressions of Buñuel's surprising dedication to the subject. The comments of Carrière, who collaborated with Buñuel on most of the director's later works, carries over into a solo interview in which the writer recalls gathering Catholic "hereticism" histories in preparation for the film. He also elaborates on the director's hard-earned distrust of dogma, whether that of religious or political groups, or that of artistic sects like the surrealist movement, of which he was a part.

Most instructive is an interview with film historian Ian Christie, who situates the film's production in the context of contemporaneous political upheavals, particularly the May 1968 uprisings across France. Given the revolutionary tenor of the times, Buñuel's attention to religion was then seen as quaint and in its own way as heretical. *The Milky Way* was even criticized as being pro-Catholic, which just seems obtuse. But perhaps sequences such as one intercutting red-and-black-flag-carrying protestors assassinating the pope (played by Buñuel) with uniformed school girls reciting anti-heretical statements was provocative in too confusing a manner for various factions to wholeheartedly embrace the film.

Christie also delineates the film's literary



A typically sacrilegious scene in Luis Buñuel's *The Milky Way* (1969) (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).



Paul Frankeur and Laurent Terzieff in *The Milky Way* (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

precursors, from *Don Quixote* to *The Saragossa Manuscript*, and its cinematic influences. With *Belle de jour* in 1967 and especially *The Milky Way* two years later, Buñuel can be seen as incorporating the nonlinear, discursive narrative techniques employed by Resnais and Godard.

It's difficult to imagine the old anarchist needing much encouragement to adopt such methods, but Buñuel had long since stylistically left behind the kind of brio Godard displayed in, say, *Weekend*, which *The Milky Way* superficially resembles in some aspects. As revealed in the excellent Criterion transfer, the director's style is smooth and relatively sedate; director of photography Christian Matras's camerawork is pleasingly fluid, though some of the compositions put one in mind of the static tableaux of biblical pageants. The film's cast is large and dotted with names, including Alain Cuny, Michel Piccoli (as the Marquis de Sade), and Delphine Seyrig (as the Whore of Babylon), but these amount to nothing much more than cameos in the manner of John Wayne's Roman centurion in George Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. The late cohesion of style, performance, and content seen in 1972's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* had not yet fully emerged.

No matter. Buñuel's quicksilver wit is intact in *The Milky Way*, helping one to get over rough patches like a lengthy interlude involving two hunters, a virgin, and a chatterbox priest in a country inn. The movie is pretty much all talk, which probably persuaded the Criterion packagers to spare us the distraction of a commentary. But the talk is rich and steeped in ambiguity, "casting doubt on all the answers we've had," in Christie's words. Despite his vaunted lack of belief, Buñuel was drawn to mystery, to the miraculous. In fact, he concludes with one of Christ's miracles, refusing to definitively dispute it... only to raise a skeptical eyebrow.—**John Calhoun**

Ace in the Hole

Directed by Billy Wilder; screenplay by Billy Wilder, Lesser Samuels, and Walter Newman; cinematography by Charles Lang, Jr.; starring Kirk Douglas and Jan Sterling. DVD, B&W, 111 min., 1951. A Criterion Collection release, criterionco.com, distributed by Image Entertainment, www.image-entertainment.com.

In writing about *Ace in the Hole*, one has to decide: Do you make it familiar, or do you make it strange?

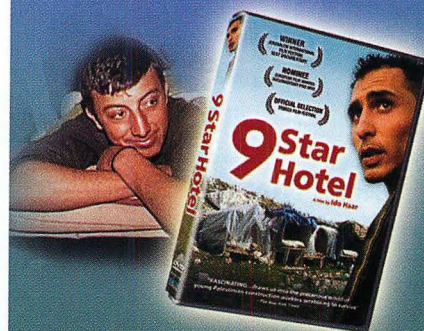
What's familiar about the film is the early glimpse it gives us of social and cultural pathologies that have grown, arguably, only more garish and ubiquitous over time—cynical media manipulation of private pathos, goading a jaded and bored populace into morbid curiosity that quickly transforms itself into a wild circus bordering on mass hysteria. What's also recognizable are the character types of postwar *film noir* embodied by the principal protagonists—a discontented male lead, chafing against his personal and practical limitations; a cold-blooded wife of a hapless husband; a corrupt and opportunistic lawman; transgressors all. Here, in this sense, is a film more or less consistent with what we know, a *noir* thriller made unusual because of the disturbing social phenomena that blossom from the roots of the genre's customary private psychological dramas.

But the familiarity of *Ace in the Hole* (like so many other aspects of director Billy Wilder's themes and style) is deceptive. How else explain how frequently the film has been rejected or sidelined, from its initial box-office disaster in 1951 (prompting its distributor, Paramount, to rename it *The Big Carnival*) to its long absence from public availability in video and DVD formats, now recuperated by its first DVD release, distinguished by The Criterion Collection's sumptuous care for the image and generous offering of documentary and interpretative supplements. Beyond his carefully cultivated wry and *gemütlich* public persona—on view in this two disc set in a 1980 interview with French critic Michel Ciment and a 1986 appearance at the American Film Institute—Wilder as filmmaker was just as capable of offending critics and spectators as he was of pleasing them, and *Ace in the Hole* is Exhibit A in his manner of giving offense. For decades, commentators chalked up the unpleasant side of Wilder to an all-pervasive cynicism. Lately we've come to acknowledge that Wilder wasn't so much cynical as unwilling to sugarcoat the way he saw the world.

What makes *Ace in the Hole* the opposite of familiar—perhaps "uncanny" is the appropriate word—is the implacability, the comprehensiveness, of its dour view. After the success of *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Wilder had ended his long-term screenwriting collaboration with Charles Brackett,

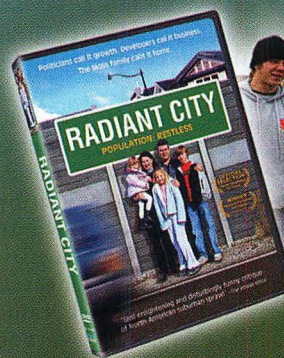
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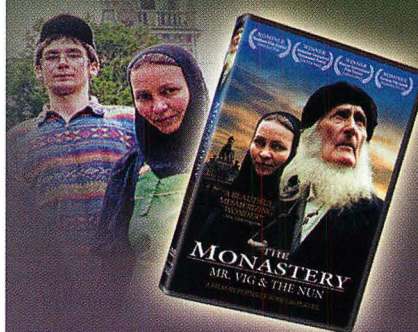
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Kirk Douglas stars as cynical journalist Chuck Tatum in Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

often also his producer, who had served to soften the director's severe social outlook. Freed from that constraint, Wilder considered an idea proposed by a new writing partner, Walter Newman (as Newman recounts on an audio document among Criterion's supplementary material). This was the story of Floyd Collins, who became pinned by a rock while exploring a cave in Kentucky in 1925. A local reporter kept in contact with Collins, feeding the story of the rescue effort to newspapers across the country, whose screaming front-page headlines drew inquisitive crowds to the site. After eighteen days underground, Collins died. The Collins saga remained vivid for many years thereafter, a harbinger of the media's power to activate mass emotions.

Now serving as his own producer for the first time, Wilder (with Newman and a third writer, Lesser Samuels), used the Collins story as a template, bringing the action into the present and relocating it in New Mexico (which offered the opportunity for a more complex ethnic mix than the original Collins tale, taking in the western state's Native American and Hispanic cultures). Even more significantly, they shifted the emphasis from the victim to the media manipulator. To portray this central character, a defrocked big-city reporter named Charles "Chuck" Tatum, Wilder enlisted Kirk Douglas, emerging as a star after his Oscar-nominated portrait of a driven, ambitious prize fighter in *Champion* (1949). Douglas—whose 1984 interview about the film also is included among the extras—gives Wilder's worldly skepticism a cold, misanthropic desperation, denying spectators any haven in illusion or hope. Jan Ster-

ling as Lorraine Minosa, embittered wife of the trapped man, Leo, matches his brilliantly caustic characterization.

The film begins in a comic, ironic mode, with Tatum arriving in Albuquerque insouciantly behind the wheel of a convertible—which is being pulled by a tow truck. He lands a job at the *Sun-Bulletin* newspaper and bemuses the staid denizens of its newsroom with his sly innuendoes and city-slicker frustrations, while a darker melody of his self-destructiveness plays beneath them. Driving with a young photographer into the barren hinterlands on a mundane reporting assignment, Tatum notices a commotion outside a dreary, dust-caked curio shop. Leo Minosa, it turns out, has been pinned by falling debris while hunting in ancient Indian burial caves for new curios to sell in his roadside store. Tatum knows about Floyd Collins. This could be his ticket back to the big time.

A superstitious remark gives Tatum his clue on how to hype the story: "Ancient Curse Entombs Man" reads the head over his by-line. A further undertone in Wilder's treatment is a mordant portrait of the modern American West, New Mexico style, with a native past producing both souvenirs and curses, a Hispanic present represented by Leo's devoutly Catholic but ineffectual parents, and forward-looking Anglos, rapacious, immoral, and self-absorbed. Tatum persuades Lorraine to playact as the devoted wife and teams up with a complaisant sheriff to prolong the rescue effort, so the story will last longer and give him the leverage to regain his big-city career.

Wilder unfolds this tragedy in the making along two main thematic lines, beyond

the psychopathologies of his major and minor characters. The first and most obvious one, as previously noted, is media manipulation and its social consequences. Leo Minosa's story starts out as a newspaper event, as was the case with Floyd Collins, but the director also brings into play newer media that didn't figure in the 1920s frenzy—radio, television, and, crucially if obliquely, the movie medium itself. Within the narrative, in particular, live radio transmissions from the scene give voice to bystanders and pose a potential, though containable, challenge to Tatum's orchestration of events through the press. Television plays a token role, limited by the then state of its technology to a more distant, less mobile position suited mostly for official pronouncements.

What is most intriguing about Wilder's views on media is what he implies about the role of his own medium. As the bleak plain between Minosa's curio shop and the Indian caves becomes transformed into a carnival site—as crowds swell and prices go up and amusements appear and traffic snarls and a special train disgorges hordes of fresh onlookers running to become part of the scene—the thought may occur that Wilder is putting into question his own role as filmmaking instigator, and ours as at least vicarious spectators of this burgeoning mass hysteria. As public fervor grows in intensity, not one but four large trucks pass from right to left across the scene, each labeled "The Great S&M Amusement Corp." They give ample notice that the sadomasochistic enjoyment of Leo's plight by the on-site revelers is something that the film industry promotes and produces for the theater-bound viewer as well.

The second principal theme harks back to the director's 1944 triumph, *Double Indemnity*. A little family arrives by car to become the first curiosity seekers at the site; the father identifies himself (to a radio interviewer) as an employee of Pacific All-Risk, which is also the name of the insurance company that figured centrally in the earlier film. This is a signal that *risk* is one of Wilder's central subjects. If his principal characters are invariably deceivers or transgressors, what are the risks involved? How do you weigh them? Individuals lack the actuarial models with which insurers shape their policies and costs. The *Sun-Bulletin's* cautious editor wears a belt and also suspenders, no risk of his pants falling down, and Tatum at first emulates him. But Leo's hazardous curio hunting, against both the putative ancient curse and the present reality of rotting timbers and falling rock, serves to reactivate Tatum's recklessness. He ostentatiously removes his apparently redundant suspenders, but he has failed to calculate the risk, both to Leo and to himself.

As it becomes clear to Tatum that his forcing a change of tactics has ruined Leo's chance of rescue, he forges a dual identity

with the doomed man: both took a chance, both misunderstood the odds, both are trapped in a hole, real or metaphorical. Tatum's similar fate becomes the logical necessity of the narrative. He becomes Leo's surrogate, not as passive victim but as resentful avenger, forcing Lorraine to put on a cheesy fur stole Leo bought her for the couple's anniversary, choking her with it until, defending her life, she give him a fatal stab wound with a pair of scissors. In the film's final shot, his lifeless body drops toward the camera, turning the screen black. There's no ray of light left for the spectator, no moral redemption, no better future for someone, anyone—only the drifting crowds departing in clouds of dust, until the next media sensation unites them into morbid momentary community. Unlike Tatum and Leo, you may come out of *Ace in the Hole* alive, but implicated anew in the knowledge of how social groups thrive on the gratifications of disaster. *Ace in the Hole* should come with a disclaimer: Watch at your own risk.—Robert Sklar

Saoirse?

Directed by George Morrison; music by Seán Ó Riada; commentary by Seán Mac Réamoinn; Gaelic with English subtitles; B&W, 92 mins. Distributed by Gael Linn, www.gael-linn.ie.

Following the release by Gael Linn of George Morrison's 1959 documentary, *Mise Éire* (see review in *Cineaste*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2), the Irish-language organization has made available on DVD the second installment of its trilogy of films on Ireland's struggle for independence. Morrison's 1960 sequel, *Saoirse?*, had been, like its predecessor, hitherto unavailable in any format but film, its audience limited by its lack of English subtitles. The Gael Linn DVD of *Saoirse?* comes with optional English subtitles, terse enough to lose much of the poetic richness of the original language, but helpful nonetheless for audiences interested in Irish history but previously impeded by lack of fluency in Gaelic. And that audience is potentially quite sizable, given the recent international success of Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, a film which has fictional parallels to some of the real events of the Morrison films.

The film's title (pronounced *seer-sha*—a phonetic conundrum made more manageable by the recent media ubiquity of *Atone-ment*'s Oscar-nominated teen actress, Saoirse Ronan) is Gaelic for freedom, and its interrogative suffix questions both the reality of the heavily-compromised liberty that Ireland had wrested from the British in the War of Independence, and the price paid in human carnage to maintain it in the years that followed.

Saoirse? charts Ireland's turbulent journey from the formation of the first indepen-

dent government in Dublin in 1919, to the beginning of the Civil War in 1922. Morrison's film hews closely to the esthetic template that had proved so successful in Ireland a year earlier with *Mise Éire*—skillfully-edited silent newsreel footage, culled from contemporary British Pathé and Gaumont sources, depicts the chief protagonists on both sides of Ireland's fight for self-government, and alternates with still photographs and newspaper headlines of pivotal events of the time, with narration in Irish. Zooms and pans across newspaper stills lend dynamism to static original material, a novel approach in documentary filmmaking forty-eight years ago, but all too commonplace today. Dramatic montages of Irish coastal scenery (the fabled Cliffs of Moher in County Clare feature prominently) are accompanied by a stirring score from Seán Ó Riada, composer of the celebrated folk-symphonic soundtrack for *Mise Éire*.

Saoirse? is divided into three sections and takes up Ireland's story where the earlier film left off—*Dáil Éireann*, covering the establishment of the first parliament in Dublin in January 1919, catalyzed by the resounding success of the Sinn Féin candidates in the 1918 Westminster elections; *Bearna Baoil* (Gap Of Danger), addressing the brutal suppression of this freedom movement by British forces regular and otherwise; and *Cogadh Carad*, (Civil War) detailing the consequences of the notorious independence treaty negotiated in London in the autumn of 1921.

Saoirse? starts on a positive note as Ireland's newly-elected Sinn Féin MPs defy Westminster to take their seats at an assembly of their own in Dublin. Optimism quickly fades as the autonomy that seems within reach after eight centuries of occupation is brutally denied by an empire determined to hang onto its oldest colony. Suppression of the new parliament prompted an armed response from the IRA, which pursued a campaign of attacks on the local British police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary. Raids on the RIC barracks around the country yielded weapons to augment the IRA arsenal, and demoralized the police to the extent that Minister of War Winston Churchill proposed that they be supplemented by an auxiliary force recruited from the ranks of demobbed WWI veterans. The Auxiliaries were to be given sweeping powers under martial law to deal with the rebels as they saw fit.

Thus, clad in mismatched outfits from British police and army quartermasters due to a postwar shortage of uniforms, the Black and Tans were created, and entered the annals of infamy in Ireland. Morrison uses British newsreel footage of the Tans' campaign to dramatic effect, showing the looting and burning that reduced Ireland's industry and infrastructure to rubble and cinders in 1921 as the IRA and the Crown forces fought each other to a standstill.

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The Battle of Dublin during the Irish Civil War in 1922 left parts of the city in ruins. A scene from George Morrison's compilation documentary, *Saoirse?* (1960) (photo courtesy of Gael Linn).

Negotiations in London to restore peace are shown, the Irish delegation led initially by U.S.-born Sinn Féin president Eamon de Valera. The talks proved fruitless, as both sides remained diametrically opposed.

A second conference was held that would soon prove Ireland's undoing. Regarded by revisionists as the duplicitous villain of the piece, de Valera declined to lead the second Irish delegation (probably realizing that the best offer he could expect from Lloyd George would be dismissed as worthless by his IRA cohorts back in Ireland, who would then brand him a sellout). Thus de Valera's comrade and provisional government minister Michael Collins was seconded to London to lead the Irish team against their formidable opponents in the British cabinet. The Treaty that Collins's team signed was met with relief, initially, in war-weary Ireland—the Dáil assembly of January 1921 voted to support it by a small margin, and the general election of June 1922 returned pro-Treaty candidates to government with a substantial majority.

Democratically sanctioned quasi-independence, at gunpoint, perhaps (Lloyd George had promised an immediate return to all-out war if the proffered Treaty was turned down), but the people had spoken. De Valera, who could hardly have wrung a better deal himself from Lloyd George, countered this popular mandate with a demagogic campaign demanding a return to arms, against their own countrymen if they stood in the way, to fight for full Republic status. Collins took his case to the people arguing that the Treaty was a good start on the road to full autonomy. Both leaders are shown at the peak of their oratory powers addressing street rallies (would that their

firebrand rhetoric, shown in *Saoirse?* on silent newsreel footage, had an audio track) in what would become an escalating national argument leading inevitably to civil war. The controversial details of the Treaty regarding the compromised sovereignty that infuriated the de Valera faction so much are not made clear in *Saoirse?*—director Morrison clearly assumes in his narrow target audience, the Gaelic-speaking Irish citizenry of 1960, a familiarity with the tenor of the times that scarcely exists today, in Ireland or anywhere else.

A key issue that is not elaborated in the film is the inclusion in the treaty agreement of an oath of allegiance to the Crown—true sovereignty would require no such fealty, and de Valera was prepared to launch a civil war over this controversial clause. His anti-Treaty faction forced Ireland back into combat, this time pitting the rebels of the IRA against their former comrades in the provisional Irish government. The film ends on a despairing note in June 1922 with the Battle of Dublin, a street conflict that would leave some of the city's finest Georgian architecture in smoking ruins and launch a summer of open warfare between the Free State forces and the IRA irregulars.

Beyond the scope of the film's timeframe, the autumn would see the opposed forces revert to the cruel guerrilla tactics that had worked so well for them against the British but ultimately resulted in a descent into the kind of barbarism they had so recently deplored in the Black and Tans. The savage and pointless conflict ended in May of 1923, its futility underlined by the resumption of government office by de Valera supporters within a decade, without any substantive changes to the terms of defi-

nition of the Irish Free State.

The grim internecine tone of Morrison's *Saoirse?* failed to captivate the cinemagoers of Ireland the way that the doomed heroic struggle of *Mise Éire* had done a year earlier. The Gael Linn project lost momentum and Morrison never completed his trilogy, though a short version of the third installment was included, confusingly, with *Mise Éire* on the first DVD, as *An Tine Beo* (*The Living Fire*). Directed by *Mise Éire* editor Louis Marcus, who would go on to become one of Ireland's most important documentary filmmakers of the late twentieth century, the footage consisted largely of reminiscences by surviving heroes of the War of Independence.

Nor did the *Saoirse?* soundtrack ignite the imagination of the people of Ireland the way Sean Ó Riada's score for *Mise Éire* had done. The composer followed the same formula as before, adapting familiar Irish ballads for orchestra to punctuate the drama of the film, but the horrors of the Black and Tans and the Civil War inspired a surfeit of atonal clanging on the harpsichord that jarred with the sentimental expectations set by his earlier work. Ó Riada's reputation rests on the score of the first Morrison film and on his work with Ceolteoiri Cualainn, an innovative folk group that begat The Chieftains and made possible Planxty, The Bothy Band, and De Danann; unlike the *Mise Éire* score, his work on *Saoirse?* has negligible recognition beyond its original context.

Gael Linn's new DVD arrives with scant extras, beyond a companion CD of the Ó Riada score. Some newsreel footage of the Dublin premiere is included, but no additional historical information is added for the benefit of viewers lacking a detailed knowledge of Irish history. The prominent characters on the English side, Lloyd George, Birkenhead, and Churchill, need no introduction, and de Valera, Collins, and Arthur Griffith on the Irish side would be known to the initiated. But inexpert scholars could use a little help as to who the dozens of minor Irish protagonists, cited without elaboration in the film, actually were. Household names they may have been in Ireland in 1922, but not elsewhere, or since.

The DVD release of Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* features an additional audio commentary from Professor Donal O'Driscoll of University College Cork, which places many of the fictional incidents of that film in the historic context that inspired them; Gael Linn might well have broadened their audience for *Saoirse?* by emulating this strategy. The DVD remains nonetheless a welcome addition to the uncrowded shelf of discs available on this dark phase of Ireland's development, and finally makes available an important cultural document that had lain dormant too long in the vaults of Gael Linn.—
Michael Gray

A Cottage on Dartmoor

Fortunately, the thunderclap jabbering from the *The Jazz Singer* (1927) took a while to register with the electronically impaired British motion-picture industry. Like the recently rediscovered *Piccadilly*, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1929), a moody thriller newly restored by the British Film Institute and crisply rendered on disc by Kino International, confirms the superfluity of synchronous dialog. Directed by Anthony Asquith, best known for handsomely mounted adaptations such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) and heretofore not known as a visual virtuoso, this proto-noir is a delirious collage of German Expressionism, Soviet montage, and Hollywood convention. The opening hook throws a slick sucker punch. From off-screen space above, an escaping prisoner falls into the frame. In long shot, silhouetted by the dappled light of dusk, he darts across Heathcliffian moors, pausing to drink from a pool that dissolves to the waters of a bassinet where a young mother bathes her baby, safe and secure in what must be the title cottage. Furtively, threateningly, the desperate convict sneaks inside and watches the woman until her eyes meet his. "Joe!" she cries out in intertitle. She knows him! Jump cut to a well-lit barber shop where Joe—fresh-faced, spruced up, free and happy—turns to meet her gaze, as if in response. "Yes, Sally?," he says to the girl, now a manicurist and his coworker, as the flashback unspools the story that brought the couple to the cottage on Dartmoor. (Distributed by Kino International Home Entertainment, www.kino.com)—**Thomas Doherty**

Cría cuervos

Cría cuervos (Spain, 1975) is an exceptional film in the growing-up subgenre in part because of the inspired casting of the strikingly wide-eyed and impish Ana Torrent, who plays a now cute, now dangerous eight-year-old girl, Ana, attempting to cope with the death and repression she senses all around her as she grows up in a gloomy and rundown old mansion in Madrid. The setting is summer 1975, when Generalissimo Franco and his right-wing dictatorship literally lay dying. In response to her repressive environment, the emotionally disturbed, gullible, and rebellious Ana resolves to become a pint-sized serial killer and dole out death by... *Cría cuervos* is widely regarded as screenwriter-director Carlos Saura's masterpiece. His three greatest achievements are the remarkable use of subjective camera and other techniques to convincingly suggest a child's-eye perspective on growing up; the unusual narrative construction and editing techniques that allow characters to seamlessly "come and go" from the past to the present within Ana's unbalanced psychic realm; and the filmmaker's success in critiquing aspects of Francoist society, such as the oppressive situation of middle-class women under that patriarchy. This Criterion DVD boasts a superb high-definition digital transfer and accurately translated English subtitles. The extras on this meticulously produced two-disc set: an informative documentary on Saura and interviews with a now adult Torrent and with Geraldine

Chaplin, who—most remarkably—plays both Ana's mother and the adult Ana herself in 1995, retrospectively reflecting on her life as a troubled child twenty years earlier. (A Criterion Collection release, distributed by Image Entertainment, www.image-entertainment.com)—**Dennis West**

The Ear

It's good to see one of the most overtly politically critical of the Czech films, Karyl Kachyna's *The Ear* (1970), surface on DVD. Shot right after the post-1968 Warsaw Pact invasion by the Soviets, it was withheld for two decades from circulation. Kachyna's visually arresting film (e.g., striking camera angles and stunning use of light and darkness) is a scathing critique of the Husak regime and the Czech Communist bureaucracy. The film focuses on an embattled couple—Ludvik (Radoslav Brzobohaty), a

altered to secure an R rating. The more explicit images not only capture more fully the Freudian dreamscape of sexual obsession in Schnitzler's source novel but also lend deeper resonance in the context of Kubrick's other work. In the orgy's design and circular tracking, Kubrick himself comes full circle, recalling the circularity of thought during *Paths of Glory*'s court martial and in *Dr. Strangelove's* War Room—where psychosexual paranoia transforms humans into cogs driven by a hard-wired death wish. In *Eyes Wide Shut* the millionaire Ziegler explains away events that may have led to a woman's death, eerily normalizing the more bizarre performance and phallic excess of *Strangelove*. In transposing similar tropes to the deceptively simpler context of upper-class sex and marriage, Kubrick perhaps more frighteningly hints that rapprochement is a fragile prospect indeed—whether in confronting a Vietcong sniper or in shopping at F.A.O. Schwartz and going home to "fuck," as the charged last word of Kubrick's final film

implies. (Distributed by Warner Bros. Home Entertainment, <http://www.warnerbros.com>)—**Cynthia Lucia**

Staff Recommendations

Cineaste Editors Tout Their Favorite Recent DVD Releases

senior ministry official, and Anna (Jirina Bohdalová), his alcoholic, furious wife. Returning home from a government function (where he has learned that his immediate boss and close friend has been arrested), the venomous pair exchange barbed insults, while spending a sleepless, anxiety-ridden night in their home, frightened that the government is about to arrest Ludvik. Adding to the tension, Kachyna seamlessly intercuts flashbacks from the government function, most of them shot from Ludvik's point of view. In retrospect, the party begins to seem to him like a Kafkaesque nightmare with every word his fellow bureaucrats utter now feeling ominous to the beleaguered Ludvik. The anguish of their marriage echoes the social despair of living under the sway of a secret police that places listening devices all over Ludvik's home. As their trepidation escalates, the couple begin to express some concern for each other. That's all a man like Ludvik, who serves a government where intimidation is the governing principle, can hope for. The DVD includes an informative, penetrating introduction to the film and Kachyna's career by British critic Peter Hames. (Distributed by Second Run DVD, www.secon-drundvd.com)—**Leonard Quart**

Eyes Wide Shut

Released shortly after his death, Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* sparked some disappointed critics to accuse more positive critics of *auteurist* myopia, intensified by the loss of the admittedly masterful filmmaker. In the former camp, I'm surprised by the film's ever-more absorbing fascination as Dr. Bill Harford's dreamlike excursion unveils treacherous fault lines beneath the stable landscape of a successful marriage and career. What seemed a limited and flat performance by Cruise now appears brilliantly calibrated, with his slightly self-conscious edge hinting at Bill's growing sense of displacement—eventually luring him to a Long Island mansion where the wealthy ritualize sex in grave, stentorian tones. Warner's newly remastered DVD restores the original orgy sequence, portions of which had been digitally

Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse

Weird as it seems to imagine a canon of "making-of" documentaries, Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper's feature-length dissection of the production of *Apocalypse Now* is a prime candidate for inclusion. Released in 1991, it was AWOL from the 2005 "Complete Dossier" of Coppola's classic Vietnam-as-Madness riff. It is now available in a mediocre transfer buoyed by two strange extras: a one-hour making-of on the recent *Youth without Youth*, disingenuously billed as a "Coda" to *Hearts*; and newly-recorded commentary by Frances and wife Eleanor, whose diary footage forms the skeleton of the original documentary. What's bizarre about the latter is that *Hearts* is already a head-spinning movie palimpsest. Starting with the object under scrutiny, there are letterboxed shots from the completed film, Eleanor's scruffy 16mm images of unending chaos on the set, secretly recorded domestic blathering by Frances, post-production interviews with the principals (save for Marlon Brando), retrospective interviews circa 1991, plus assorted visual and audio inserts—including photos from Welles's aborted attempt to film Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and clips from his radio adaptation—that add yet another editorializing layer. Rather than brush the source movie with a glaze of adulation—the corporatist function of conventional making-ofs—Bahr and Hickenlooper use Eleanor's images to paint a spectacularly demystifying, comical, and snarky portrait of a true film artist at work. Rampant drug use, mental and physical breakdowns, suspect dealings with Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, gross budgetary excesses—the production was, as Frances famously asserted, homologous with the Vietnam War itself. No wonder his latest comments try to revise history, recasting in a more benevolent light his role as master of a cinematic quagmire. (A Paramount Home Entertainment release, www.paramount.com)—**Paul Arthur**

BOOK REVIEWS

It's All True:

**Orson Welles's
*Pan-American Odyssey***

by Catherine Benamou. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. 416 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$60.00 and paperback: \$24.95.

Discovering Orson Welles

by Jonathan Rosenbaum. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007. 346 pp. Hardcover: \$60.00 and paperback: \$24.95.

One would think that by this time Orson Welles's reputation would be more secure and untroubled than it is, and that any fluctuations would be between high points on the scale, not extremes of high and low. This is not to say that Welles should be insulated from negative evaluations of his less successful ventures, of which there were many, or diversity of judgment about his achievement, which I think is not only inevitable but productive. But what is not so productive is that for an artist of such demonstrable achievement and importance, Welles has been extraordinarily baited, pilloried, and misunderstood.

At stake is more than reputation. The debt we owe to a serious artist, for our sake as well as theirs, is careful and comprehensive examination and proper understanding, response, and appreciation. To do that with Welles we need a sympathetic attitude (or at least not an antipathetic one), new information, and new paradigms for approaching how he worked and what he did and didn't do. These *desiderata* are guiding principles throughout the books I focus on in this review, two important new (although also in some respects old) critical studies of Welles: Catherine Benamou's long-awaited *It's All True: Orson Welles's Pan-American Odyssey* an extensively revised, expanded, and updated version of her (in some circles) legendary NYU Ph.D. dissertation, and Jonathan Rosenbaum's *Discovering Orson Welles*, a collection of nearly all his writings on Welles through more than three decades, with new commentaries on each. Both Benamou and Rosenbaum are extremely knowledgeable scholars and critics as well as "keepers of the flame," indefatigable defenders and preservers of Welles's reputation. There is, to be

sure, plenty of devotional warmth (not to mention argumentative heat) in their books, but it is their light that makes them worthy additions to the short shelf of essential works on Welles.

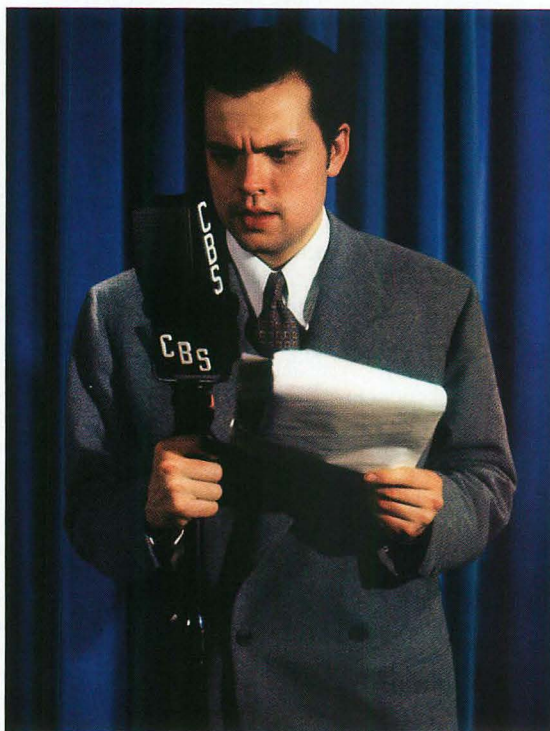
Much contemporary critical work in effect identifies Welles's characteristic genre as, for better and for worse, the unrealized project. Benamou's book is a case study of perhaps Welles's most important unfinished and unreleased film. *It's All True* is commonly deemed not even a magnificent but a devastating failure, symptomatic of all that is wrong with Welles as a person and as a filmmaker, and fundamentally an abandoned and lost film that left few traces besides scars. Benamou spends approximately four hundred tightly printed pages arguing and conclusively proving otherwise.

To do so, she adopts a "prismatic and archaeological" approach, one well suited to her insistence that the real subject here is an inextricably interwoven personal story and socio-historical matrix. "Prismatic," of course, recalls *Citizen Kane*, and, as in that film, Benamou's analytical narrative of the work on *It's All True* takes into account multiple perspectives on the unfolding events, including Welles and various representatives of the RKO studio, the primary antagonists, but also reports from North and South American media, the Office of

the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), and many of the people featured in the film. Benamou is an archaeologist not only in that she unearths hidden artifacts—and this passing mention doesn't do justice to her astonishing archival and field work on several continents—but also in her effort to use them to rebuild a culture: in this case, a culture of filmmaking that includes sometimes overlapping but other times competing and incompatible agendas of creative individuals, profit-hungry studios, self-serving governments, and people striving for a variety of human rights.

Chapter 1 provides a detailed discussion of the origins of the film and its early production history, highlighting its relationship to Welles's plans and interests at the time and its transformation as it became part of the U.S. government-supported cultural "Good Will" program. This section is the most clearly written and conventionally expository part of the entire book, effectively presenting what Benamou labels a "working overview," but, like the "News on the March" section of *Citizen Kane*, it is a short-lived oasis of exposition and stability. The latter recedes as we delve further into what it is exactly that we are talking about when we refer to *It's All True*.

The key complexities and ironies of the subject start to emerge fully in chapter 2, which focuses on the fascinating spectacle of the "text-in-the-making." Benamou patiently examines each of the stories that were considered for inclusion in this multipart film, and we get a close look at the evolution of its structure and intentions. She concentrates primarily on the four stories that were most fully articulated: *My Friend Bonito*, a "pivotal episode" about communal life and personal as well as cultural rites of passage; *Four Men on a Raft*, about the epic journey of the *jangadeiros*, who led protests for political and economic justice; *The Story of Jazz*, focusing on the life of Louis Armstrong and the roots of a major form of popular culture; and *Carnaval*, which documents and celebrates the rich life of the underclass in Brazil. What makes this part of the book not only fascinating but unnerving, though, is the reminder that Benamou's aim is "a *revaluation* as well as a reconstruction" of a "text-in-the-making" that exists in the form of notes, treatments, scraps of scripts, production records, memos, memories, thousands of feet of footage actually shot, and versions assembled by hands other than Welles's.



Welles during his CBS radio days, his filmmaking career still ahead of him (photo courtesy of Photofest).

As such, *It's All True* is extremely well suited to an examination of its making, but alas, also its unmaking. Benamou devotes much attention to this latter process, particularly to correct the common notion that the demise of the film should be blamed on what has been called Welles's irresponsible behavior and personal deficiencies. This at least, as she shows in chapter 3, was the image of Welles conveyed by North American media reports, which weighed heavily in the studio's perception of Welles and their decision to remove their support, and pictured him as a riotous, undisciplined, grotesque character. Much in contrast, Brazilian newspapers and magazines routinely portrayed him as an admirable "sensitive but yet uncompromising artist and public intellectual," dedicated to an important film project.

Benamou uses this focus on Welles's character in the media as the departure point for extensive comments on what turns out to be a key subtheme of the book: a critique but also recuperation of *auteurism*. Her emphasis throughout is on the socio-political, institutional, and cultural components of a film, but "without abandoning the constructive aspects . . . of the auteur theory as a tool for deciphering and evaluating film texts." This comprehensive approach is nicely exemplified by the following two chapters. Chapter 4 highlights the "authorial discourse" in *It's All True*, and gives many examples of how its strategies and themes—for example, its generic hybridity, experimental use of sound and image, examination of power struggles, and "reiterated concern with participatory democracy"—link it with his other films. But then chapter 5 shifts to a much broader formative context and speculates on "the intertextual niche *It's All True* might have

inhabited," comparing it to other films of the 1930s and '40s on related subjects, ranging from *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* to *Why We Fight?* and Fred Zinnemann's experimental work *Redes* (*The Wave*). Here and elsewhere, Benamou skillfully reveals how Welles's works are communal and corporate as well as individual and personal, generic as well as *sui generis*.

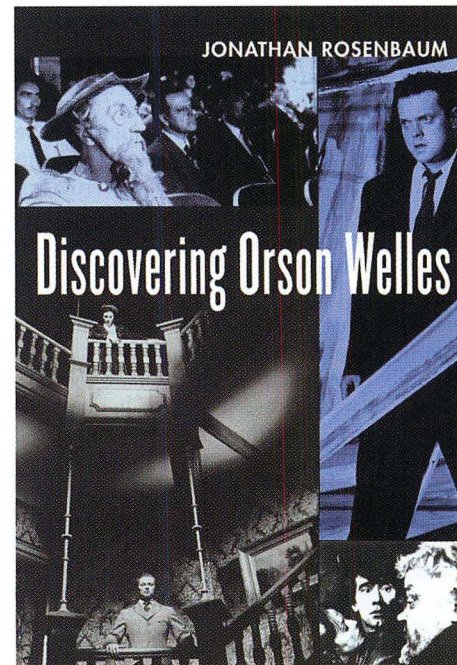
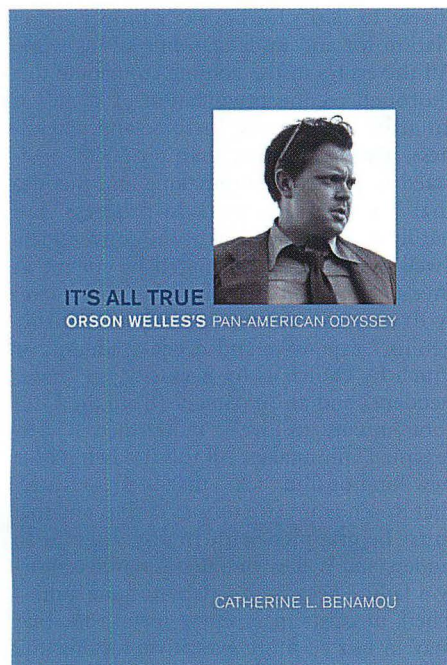
Unfortunately, the full story of *It's All True* is one of the disabling as well as enabling contexts in which Welles operated. Benamou returns in chapter 6 to elaborate on her discussion of "The Film's Suspension," and while she does not "entirely relieve" Welles of blame, her focus is on how RKO, the OCIAA, and some members of the Brazilian government and of "the Brazilian press and filmmaking communities" undermined the project, in part because they were unwilling to accept or adapt to Welles's working method but mostly because they gradually became aware that *It's All True* was turning into something quite different than the self-congratulatory public relations piece that they expected and wanted. The attacks on Welles were personal, but also fundamentally ideological. Welles antagonized not only his North American but also his Brazilian sponsors in many ways: by his casting, focusing on the underclass; by his carnivalesque treatment of Carnival, emphasizing its surging, radical energy and icons rather than its containable picturesque spectacle; and by positioning himself as, like the *jangadeiros* but unlike Brazilian president Vargas, a champion of the extension of human rights. Given the conservatism of RKO, the culture of red-baiting in the United States and anticommunism in Brazil, and the "volatile political and economic climate in which the film evolved," it is not surprising that the multileveled institutional support necessary for the completion of the film was withdrawn.

Ironically, Benamou shows that Welles was indeed largely responsible for the vulnerability of *It's All True* but much to his credit: because he dedicated himself to making a film that was incorrigibly progressive; allied with the movement working for justice, an end to racism, and an appreciation of working people and the underclass; and intended to be a thoroughgoing celebration of a radically inclusive definition of "American." Benamou shrewdly notes that, "While this posture might have cost him the completion and release of *It's All True* it is the factor most responsible for the survival of the film in popular memory and its resonance with new, alternative filmmaking initiatives to be undertaken decades later." If *It's All True* is a "phantom film," it is also one with a powerful legacy, described in chapter 7, leaving "indelible marks on [Welles's] later works" and contributing much to "the New Latin American cinema, especially the Brazilian Cinema Novo movement." Benamou's final judgment is that *It's*

All True confirms not what Welles detractors point to as a deep-seated "failure to complete" but rather his "authenticity," and at the heart of this authenticity is his dedication to progressive politics, a topic that still awaits full and, one would hope, sympathetic attention by Welles scholars.

For all its brilliance and value, Benamou's book is often difficult to engage with. Although, to be sure, she repeatedly and very successfully places Welles in broad contexts, much of her attention is narrowly focused, microscopic rather than panoramic; and much of her writing is dense and technical, offputting if not impenetrable to nonspecialists. Not so Jonathan Rosenbaum's book: he is a master of details but his basic premise is that we must examine all of Welles, and so he uses CinemaScope rather than microscope, deep focus rather than close-up. And, in keeping with one of the subtexts of the book, a critique of academic criticism, his writing gives journalism a good name: all the anthologized pieces are lively and clear with an admirably high (and increasingly rare) correlation between intelligence and intelligibility.

Discovering Orson Welles is a far-ranging miscellany, but there is an underlying unity as well, which I will try to sketch. Each item contributes to a multileveled effort to defend Welles from harsh criticism and misunderstanding often based on bias, limited knowledge, and personal and ideological antipathy, and forge a kind of criticism that suits its subject. Key to this effort is recognizing that there is a satisfactory answer to the recurrent question, often intended as an insult, that Welles himself was haunted by: "What have you done after *Citizen Kane*?" Ironically, Welles is one of the most well-known and least-known filmmakers, and





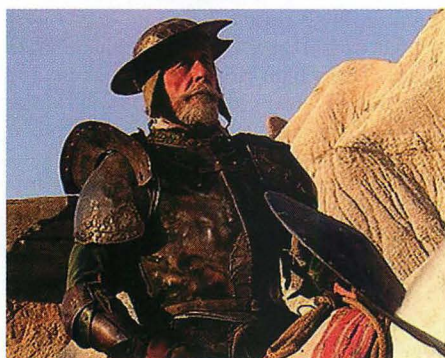
Orson Welles starred in and directed *F for Fake* (1975) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

therefore one of the first orders of business is “discovering” what he did during the last forty-five years of his life. Many of Rosenbaum’s essays elaborate on his indispensable article “The Invisible Orson Welles: A First Inventory” (1986), which gathers much of the hitherto “fragmentary evidence” confirming that “Welles’s phantom filmography really exists, and is larger than anyone expected.” If we are to reckon fully and fairly with Welles’s entire career, achievement, and evolving conception of cinema, we must include in our consideration the long list of his projects that were more than proposals and plans but somewhat less than completed and released films, such works as *It’s All True*, *The Deep*, *The Other Side of the Wind*, *The Dreamers*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *The Big Brass Ring*, and *Don Quixote*.

Calling attention to these works effectively rebuts the claim that Welles was idle after an initial period of successful activity, but Rosenbaum focuses repeatedly on broader and more damaging elements of the attacks on Welles. The book takes the form of an ongoing history of Welles criticism, and even outside the five book reviews reprinted here he is perennially concerned with surveying critical history, analyzing why the response to Welles runs in certain ways, correcting errors, and otherwise setting the record straight: in short, participating fully in “The Battle Over Orson Welles” waged between those who “see his life and career chiefly in terms of failure” and those who view “his life and career more sympathetically as well as inquisitively.” He does not shy away from pointing out that works by the former—including Pauline Kael, Charles Higham, David Thomson, and to my mind most surprisingly, Robert Carlinger and Simon Callow—often proceed from ignorance or prejudice or some com-

bination of the two. He is particularly disturbed when critics make categorically negative judgments when it is clear that they lack a comprehensive knowledge of their subject, and much of his effort is to keep the battle focused on evidence of what Welles did and didn’t do. This underlies his scrupulous attention to details and patient correcting of errors, small and large—including those that he has made through the years. But Rosenbaum is also shrewdly aware that the battle is about attitude as well as evidence. Some of the attacks on Welles are the result of sloppy scholarship, shortsightedness, and, perhaps more than we might think, personal animus, but his focus throughout the book is on the far deeper ground of the “Battle Over Orson Welles,” what he calls in the title of one of his essays “Orson Welles as Ideological Challenge.”

To put it most simply, for Rosenbaum Welles was a radical—that is, progressive in his politics, and innovative and unconventional in his working methods and esthetics—working in an environment that was fundamentally conventional and conserva-



Orson Welles’s uncompleted *Don Quixote* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

tive, and this accounts to a large extent for many of the attacks on him, many of the obstacles he faced in finding support for his work, and, on a more positive note, much of what we should recognize as his real aims and achievements. Many of the essays in this book examine the political core of Welles’s works: this includes not only unrealized projects like *It’s All True* and his script for *The Cradle Will Rock*, an homage to at least a momentary triumph of revolutionary energy, but also *Citizen Kane*, which loses its true value, Rosenbaum persuasively argues, when it is “liberated from history and ideology.” The assertion that Welles’s works are “political” is in itself an anomaly and a source of contention in a cultural climate that supports Hollywood’s desire to leave messages to Western Union and therefore practices a politics of assent by default. That they are progressive, and have a “continuing potency as an ideological threat to the status quo of American film culture” is, in all senses of the term, a red flag—and a green light for “vilification.” Rosenbaum is by no means a knee-jerk apologist, and gives an honest appraisal of Welles’s “strategic mistakes” and weaknesses,” and he is far too sophisticated and intellectually honest to merely replace one overstated narrative of Welles’s “trajectory” with another. But he does not back off his overall claim that the case of the death of Welles’s career needs to be reopened and, following the evidence he provides, reconsidered as a murder, not a suicide.

Welles’s radical esthetic is as problematic and troublesome for some as his politics, and Rosenbaum consistently highlights ways in which he is—and paid the price for being—“the great example of the talented filmmaker whose work and practices deconstruct... ‘the cinematic apparatus.’” He focuses on this not only to further his analysis of the antipathy to Welles but, more positively, to clarify the basis of a proper appreciation for and understanding of his work. All the essays in the volume contribute to a thorough reconceptualization of Welles as an artist in love with “artifice and playfulness,” “process rather than product”; dedicated to perpetual filmmaking and the idea that “all work was work-in-progress” but hardly at all to the ideal of the conventional “well-made film”; fascinated by cinema as investigation and analysis rather than merely drama and action; overall an “unruly genius,” expansive and decentered; and, as much by choice as by necessity, an “independent” and an “amateur” (from the Latin root “*amare*, ‘to love’”) rather than a “professional” filmmaker. All this lies behind the new kind of film “text” that Welles created, that Rosenbaum attempts to define, and that must be grappled with in any attempt to understand Welles: one that is not necessarily a failure because it is labyrinthine, unfinished, or exists in multiple forms; one that may in fact be more evocative, meaningful,

and of lasting truth and beauty because of its openness, incompleteness, and multiplicity.

Despite Rosenbaum's best efforts, such a challenging and new kind of "text" and image of a filmmaker may still not appeal to everyone. Although he is an extremely able, responsible, and knowledgeable defender and explicator of Welles, there is throughout the book a certain amount of special pleading and, as he acknowledges in his preface, "partisan rhetoric," and as a result some of his arguments are a bit overstated and not always entirely convincing. For example, I'm not sure that he is completely successful in turning lemons into lemonade when he attempts to transform Welles from an artist who did not complete a large number of films into an aesthete of incompleteness. And the fact that this is basically a collection of preexisting essays allows for some repetitiousness and leaves a few unexplored areas that might have been attended to in a freshly written or thoroughly revised volume. In particular, I would have traded several of the multiple counterpunches directed at Thomson, Higham, *et al.* for a more serious engagement with the work of two critics mentioned all-too-briefly that might have further supported but also usefully modified some of Rosenbaum's key points: Michael Anderegg's notion of the creative (although sometimes painful) tension in the dual figure of Welles that he envisions, part classical and part modern/postmodern, aiming toward two audiences, one popular and the other more sophisticated and restricted, might help expand the somewhat flattened picture described by Rosenbaum of a Welles gravitating more and more toward reflexive, labyrinthine, and personal films like *F for Fake*, *The Other Side of the Wind*, and *Don Quixote*. And Michael Denning's consideration of Welles as a Popular Front artist in his earlier work, nourished by one culture while critical of another, might be further integrated into Rosenbaum's insightful but somewhat undeveloped consideration of the ideological components of Welles's later work. Finally, it would be extremely valuable to hear more about what identifies Welles as an "independent" filmmaker and how Rosenbaum might place him among other "independents" such as Rossellini, Cassavetes, Tati, and Godard, who faced problems similar (although not exactly identical) to Welles's and were able to resolve some of them.

But there is still time for all that: we can celebrate the fact that we have surely not heard the last of Rosenbaum on this subject. There is every reason to believe that he will continue to do what he has done for more than thirty years and is on full display in this endlessly provocative and informative book: reveal, restore, interpret, defend, in his word "discover" a formidable Orson Welles, one who, despite his detractors' dismissal, is in Shakespeare's words well "worth the whistle."—**Sidney Gottlieb**

Mario Bava:

All the Colors of the Dark

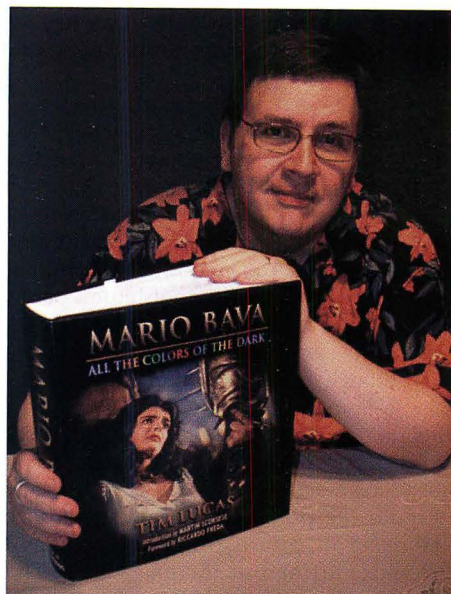
by Tim Lucas. Cincinnati, OH: Video Watchdog, 2007. 1,128 pp., illus.
Hardcover: \$260.00.

Full disclosure: You will find my name in the "Patrons" section of this remarkable volume. I've been an avid subscriber to Tim Lucas's invaluable *Video Watchdog* magazine since 1992, and when he passed the hat to help fund this self-published epic on the life and work of Italy's foremost fantastic filmmaker I did not hesitate to drop a few coins in. This was before I began contributing to *Cineaste*, I think in 2000 or so.

Seven years later, my copy of the book—heavier than my eldest cat, at a whopping twelve pounds—appeared. That seems like an eternity, but time is relative. Lucas had been working on it for *thirty-two* years, or since his teens, when he was a horror-struck admirer of the director's films, one who traveled miles from his home base in Cincinnati to Dayton to see tatty prints telecast on friends' fuzzy local stations. (The whole incredible story of one critic's obsession is told most comprehensively in an interview conducted by Stuart Galbraith IV for the DVD Talk website, located at www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/tim_lucas_inter.html.) In a way, Bava's biographer was like one of the trapped characters in his spooky *Operazione paura/Kill, Baby... Kill!!* (1966), stuck in a vortex in the time/space continuum, walking in the steps of a filmmaker who preferred to cover his tracks through myriad assignments in his profession and trying to clarify and contextualize his every footfall.

But he has done it. His magazine was excellent training. Lucas can lay claim to being the first writer to critique films as home video, cataloging, in-depth, differences in aspect ratios, running times, and content as what was onscreen translated to tape, laserdisc, and DVD. He did so in a lucid, engaging style that welcomed you into this murky universe, which no one else was examining so diligently in the earliest days of the medium, and is still the best in a field that has expanded since his pioneering efforts. Bava's films, crudely retitled, cut, and dubbed from country to country, have been "Watchdogged" for decades, and one reason the book took so long to appear was the availability of new and more complete prints in the global home-video marketplace, solving old questions but raising new ones. In large part this book is an absorbing detective story, sleuthing the byroads and back alleys of Italian and international cinema.

For the uninitiated, the first puzzle will be, "Who was Mario Bava?" Given the length and depth of Lucas's inquiry, the best answer may be, "Who *wasn't* Mario Bava?" Bava wore countless hats in the Italian cinema. The best known is director, a later-in-life occupation that officially began with the



Author Gary Lucas with his hefty, thirty-two-year labor of love.

great *La Maschera del demonio/Black Sunday* (1960), which as Lucas notes fused the classicism of Universal horrors of the Thirties with the eroticism and violence of the contemporary Hammer films from England, and added to the mix a visual expressiveness that was all Bava's own. Narrative was thereafter secondary: In his introduction, Martin Scorsese writes that he can't recall the plot of any Bava film, the *mise-en-scène* was "simply too entrancing." He also details how color pictures like *La frusta e il corpo/The Whip and the Body* (1963), *Terrore nello Spazio/Planet of the Vampires* (1965), the comic-book film *Diabolik/Danger: Diabolik* (1968), and *Ecologia del Delitto/Twitch of the Death Nerve* (1971) are deliriously enraptured with the possibilities of light, sound, and camera placement and spin deliciously perverse yarns on the tiniest of budgets.



Mario Bava (1914-1980), Italian master of the fantasy-horror film genre.

However they were distributed, they had an undeniable ripple effect on the genre, with the skeletal décor of *Vampires* mimicked in *Alien* and *Death Nerve* twitching out a whole cycle of lower-brow slasher pictures, which morphed into the “torture-porn” *Saws* and *Hostels* of today.

Assuming you can buy *All the Colors of the Dark*, breaking neither your bank nor your bookshelf, you may still be hedging, figuring it’s just another fannish tome about fantastic cinema, however elaborately conceived. Scorsese would tsk-tsk your snobbery, though as Lucas acknowledges, mystifying U.S. market retitlings like *Kill, Baby... Kill!* didn’t exactly help the cause. But there is much more woven into its gorgeously illustrated tapestry, which Lucas’s admirably tolerant wife Donna did so much to realize via desktop publishing skills learned through putting out the magazine. (The glossily voluptuous design, rich with still photos, candid behind-the-scenes shots of the filmmaker, and fabulous poster art from around the world, makes the vast majority of film books, limited in page counts and photographs by cost-conscious publishers, look positively spindly by comparison.)

Like his father Eugenio before him, Bava was a jack of all trades in Italian cinema, shooting a film here, lighting a production there, and providing brilliantly (and economically) realized trick shots for still another movie, usually without credit. For all his anonymity as a craftsman and modesty as a person, all that work culminated in a style that emerged in his own films, and Lucas painstakingly traces every strand of influence and inspiration, in cogently planned chapters encompassing more than 100 interviews, vast quantities of original research, and above all focused, unpretentious, rock-solid prose. You may not be fully acquainted with Mario Bava, but you have surely heard of G.W. Pabst, Raoul Walsh, Gloria Swanson, Roberto Rossellini, Federico Fellini, Gina Lollobrigida, Dino De Laurentiis, and many others who make vividly etched cameos in the text.

Lucas has recently announced at www.videowatchdog.blogspot.com the possibility of a more affordable “popular edition” of this book, whose hefty size is more than matched by its considerable substance. There’s nothing wrong with a good greatest hits volume, but in this instance I strongly advise going straight to the collected works. Now’s the time for an immersion, as a bevy of the best Bavas have recently been handsomely remastered by Anchor Bay Entertainment on DVD (some with typically insightful Lucas commentaries). This is not a book you read, but a book you live, much as its author did. My return on investment has been a thousandfold, and if you’re willing to join Lucas on his tour of many fascinating facets of world cinema, told through the story of one key participant, yours will be too.—Robert Cashill

Miracles and Sacrilege:

Roberto Rossellini, the Church, and Film Censorship in Hollywood

by William Bruce Johnson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 448 pp., illus. Paperback: \$35.00.

Hollywood’s Censor:

Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration

by Thomas Doherty. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 440 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$29.50.

Banned in Kansas:

Motion Picture Censorship, 1915-1966

by Gerald R. Butters, Jr. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007. 352 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$44.95.

Over the past few decades, an established account about censorship in Hollywood has settled into a comfortable consensus. It’s the story of how Catholic forces behind the Legion of Decency brought an end to the racy cinema of the early 1930s by forcing a stricter application of the industry’s censorship codes beginning in 1934. Though states and municipalities had censored movies since the birth of the new medium, producers were frustrated by the capricious nature of these uncoordinated efforts. The Supreme Court had ruled in 1915 that motion pictures didn’t deserve the protection of the First Amendment, so though producers

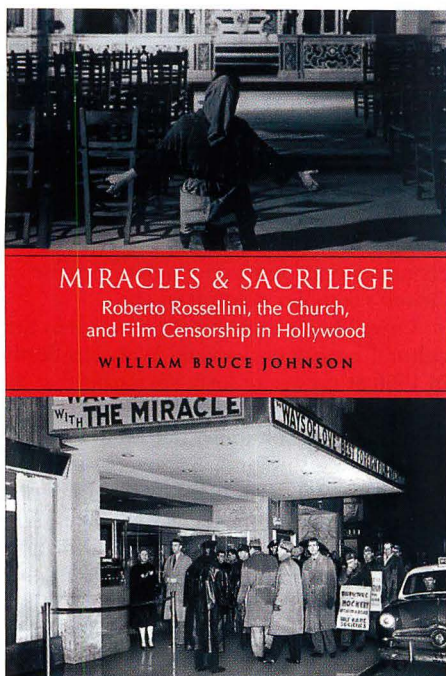
were inclined to fight state censorship, they reluctantly acquiesced to a system of self-regulation in order to more efficiently streamline the distribution of their product.

Under the leadership of Joseph Breen, this story goes, Hollywood became more conservative; the Production Code Administration (PCA) constricted directors and screenwriters’ creativity with the imposition of an ideological system that demanded “compensating moral values” in which criminals would be punished and loose women would learn the error of their ways. The most recent wave of censorship scholarship reaffirms this standard narrative while depicting the subject with a more nuanced sensitivity than ever before and pointing the way for further research.

William Bruce Johnson’s *Miracle and Sacrilege: Roberto Rossellini, The Church, and Film Censorship in Hollywood* is a terrifically researched book, but its sprawling ambition and penchant for minute detail often make it a frustratingly idiosyncratic endeavor. Despite his prominence in the subtitle, for instance, Roberto Rossellini doesn’t make his grand entrance until page 191. Along the way, Johnson exhibits his erudition with exacting analyses of Pope Pius IX’s theological attacks on modernity, the rise of nineteenth-century German biblical scholarship, Judge Learned Hand’s disquisitions on the First Amendment, and the young Bernadette Soubirous’s visions of Mary in Lourdes in 1858. Though Johnson often doesn’t articulate exactly why he’s providing such baroque detail, his argument emerges nevertheless. Better than any other scholar to date, he demonstrates how the theological and legal debates of the preceding hundred years fashioned the substance of Hollywood’s ideology in the classical period.

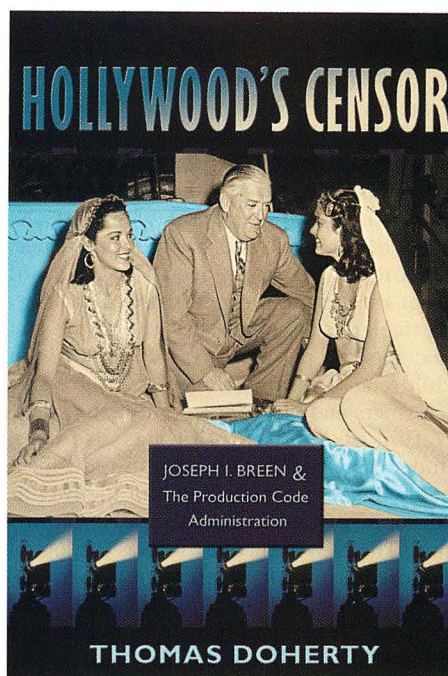


As if making the “blasphemous” film *The Miracle* (1947) wasn’t bad enough, Rossellini also scandalized devout Catholics by his adulterous relationship with Ingrid Bergman, which produced three children, including twin daughters Isabella and Isotta (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Nineteenth-century Catholic theology developed a strong antimodernist tinge, often equated with anti-Americanism in that the United States' economic and technological advances had concomitantly rendered it a symbol of a dangerously relativistic moral perspective. Johnson portrays the nineteenth-century popes as erudite but decidedly antiintellectual, quoting Leo XIII who maintained that "liberty of thinking and of publishing... [is] the fountain-head and origin of many evils." Johnson proceeds to demonstrate how the desire for a centralized and hierarchical church as the paramount authority played a greater role in the Irish tradition of Catholicism than it did, surprisingly, for the Mezzogiorno Catholics who would later comprise the bulk of Italian immigrants to the United States. Irish immigrants preceded the Italians to these shores and thus came to dominate the American church, imbuing it with the same antimodernist philosophy set forth by Leo XIII and his ilk generations earlier. Protestants in America, meanwhile, recognized no centralized hierarchy. They looked inward to discover the truth about God and, shocking to many Catholics, often returned from their introspections disinterested in Jesus' divinity and unconvinced by the evidence concerning the virgin birth. But while Catholics made up only twenty percent of the American population, they had more members than any of the dozens of Protestant denominations in the country. For Johnson, then, the Catholic authorship of Hollywood's Production Code was an almost inevitable result of an antiintellectual Catholic worldview transplanted onto a passively devout Protestant America.

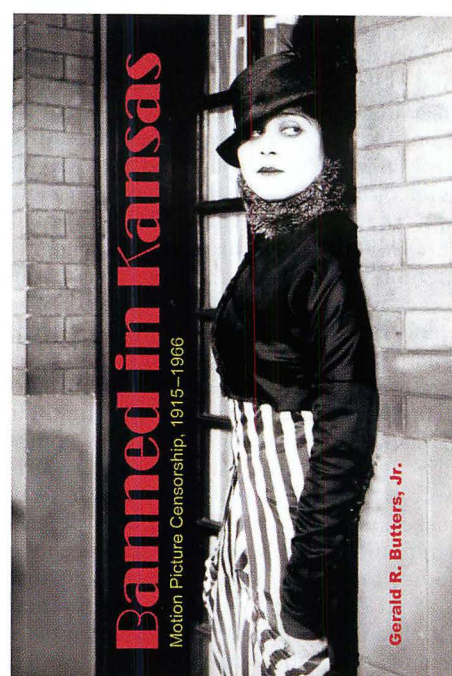
In his book *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and The Production Code Administration*, Thomas Doherty concurs with Johnson



on the centrality of Catholic theology in the role of Hollywood censorship, but his portrayal of Breen is much more nuanced and compelling. Though historians have recognized Breen's influence for decades, they have rarely tried to engage with his thinking with any depth until now; this, his first biography, is clearly the best of this new crop of books. As he's done in each of his other publications, Doherty has produced that rare academic book that is rigorously researched, insightful, and a pleasure to read for academic scholars and a general audience alike. Though scholars have long acknowledged the PCA's importance, Doherty makes a persuasive case that it was



Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen (1888-1965) (photo courtesy of Photofest).



Breen personally who held ultimate authority over studio censorship. Through his forceful personality, his bureaucratic politicking at the PCA, and his skill at negotiating with Hollywood producers, Breen managed to stamp Hollywood filmmaking with his personal vision for twenty years. As Doherty argues, Hollywood's ideology—the subject of countless scholarly debates for the last thirty years—was born of the Catholic faith but was implemented on a daily basis almost exclusively according to the personal preferences of Joseph Breen.

But, whereas Johnson, like most other scholars till now, renders Breen as a mere prig—a "bluenose," to use the term popular at the time—Doherty presents him as a worldly man who spent years abroad as a consul, journalist, and aid worker, and refers to him more than once as an "intellectual." Johnson, for example, refers to Breen's "gothic ignorance regarding art" and takes pleasure in picking out the most ridiculous examples of Breen's admonitions, including demands that producers eliminate the terms "halitosis" and "sex appeal" from their scripts. Doherty, on the other hand, points out that during his brief stint as a studio executive at RKO, Breen wanted to sign up Pare Lorentz and John Ford and gushed in a letter to Orson Welles about the dailies he'd seen of *The Magnificent Ambersons*: "I have not been so impressed in years... in this instance I have naught but praise—from my heart. God love you." It's tempting to speculate that had Breen been able to consolidate his power at RKO as efficiently as he had at the PCA, perhaps, ironically, Hollywood's greatest censor might have been the man to save Welles's masterpiece from the dumpster.

In his conclusion, Doherty renders Breen in an *auteurist* light, pointing out that

"Breen possessed the final cut over more films than anyone in the history of cinema." And in his role as censor he didn't just eliminate improprieties from the screen. He had a positive program that shaped the entire project of classical Hollywood cinema: "to think of Breen as a bluenose censor, scissors at hand, ripping into a beautiful tapestry to shred what repulsed his eyes, is to miss his method and mission.... Breen's enduring legacy lies in what he worked *in* to Hollywood cinema: a moral vision...." Indeed, what Doherty calls "the world of reticence, constraint, discretion, untruths, and unspoken" that critics find so fertile for their hermeneutical investigations today comes directly from Breen's moral esthetics. It is only at the end of his book that Doherty makes his most radical claim: that Breen's sanitization of the screen may have been the source for much of the inner tensions that animate classical Hollywood cinema: "Packed tight with coded repression, it plays like the cinematic version of a Jane Austen novel, where no one can say what he or she really means and communication depends on decoding tiny gestures and listening for slight inflections of language."

The one issue in this current batch of histories that seems to me to merit further attention is the dominant relationship between Catholic theology and the Production Code. Johnson and Doherty make a convincing case that it was Catholic activism that forced Hollywood to enact censorship—Johnson stressing the intellectual history that undergirded the Code, Doherty emphasizing the role that Catholic theologians like Daniel Lord played in writing it—but it's not always clear what's so specifically Catholic about the rules that Breen enforced. One imagines that Baptist and Congregationalist leaders might have been equally concerned that brutal killings, safe-cracking techniques, sexual perversion, white slavery, abortion, and nudity should be banished from the eyes of children. Doherty asserts that the Code was "a force for Catholic orthodoxy," but he resorts to generalizations to explain what that orthodoxy entailed, referring to the ideals of "stern sacrifice, deferred gratification, and days of obligation." But the average Lutheran in Minnesota or Methodist in Maine would most likely also admire such a vision of sacrifice and obligation. Besides Breen's ban on suicides, most everything else banned by the Code would please bluenoses of any denomination.

Gerald R. Butters, Jr. presents one view of how censorship worked in a predominantly Protestant environment in his book *Banned in Kansas: Motion Picture Censorship, 1915-1966*. Kansas established its censorship board in 1913, one of several states and municipalities that instituted censorship long before the Legion of Decency threatened protests in 1934. The collection of disparate groups that together urged the state

to censor films reflects the vast spectrum of forces that wanted to clean up the screen—women's organizations, newspaper editors, Protestant church groups, and progressive reformers. Tellingly, throughout its decades of work, the Kansas censor board was run almost exclusively by women, often regarded as the moral guardians of society. As Eleanor Roosevelt told her radio audience, censorship "has long been a question of great interest to women's organizations, particularly, of course, because of the fact that moving pictures are so popular with children." The importance of progressive reformers and New Dealers in the bowdlerization of American film has also been underappreciated. Often forgotten today, many liberals in the first half of the twentieth century were ardent advocates of censorship. The New Deal, after all, was the logical manifestation of progressive reformers' belief in social amelioration through social control. Doherty himself points out that Eleanor Roosevelt used her first address as a radio commentator to praise the efforts of the PCA under its new leadership. Though the word "Catholic" barely appears in Butters' book, the ethical obsessions in Kansas were strikingly similar to those of Joseph Breen. The primary culprits were illicit sex, violence and crime, bad language, and fast women. The major distinction in a Protestant state that was ardently in favor of Prohibition was Kansas's determination to rid drinking from the screen.

As these books make clear, the avenues for scholarship on the censorship of American movies are still quite open. Further investigation into the role played by Protestants, progressives, and women as well as studies of other local and foreign censorship boards may prove to play a major role in the next wave of scholarship on the suppression—or refinement—of American film.—

Doug Dibbern

Orwell Subverted:

*The CIA and the
Filming of Animal Farm*

by Daniel Leab. University Park, Pa.:
Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.
195pp. Hardcover: \$55.00.

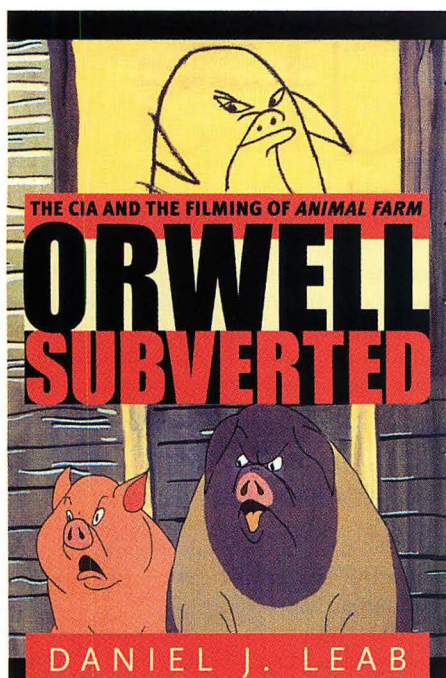
The mere mention of the Cold War can result in blank stares from college-age students. They may have been forced to read *Animal Farm* in high school as an example of political allegory and learned of George Orwell's less than subtle critique of Stalin's transformation of the ideals of the Bolshevik revolution, but many are unaware of the convoluted propaganda campaigns waged on the cultural fronts in both East and West during the 1950s. A new book by film historian Daniel Leab reminds us of yet another example of the ideological battle waged in

films of the period. In *Orwell Subverted: The CIA and the Filming of Animal Farm*, Leab aims to set the record straight on the CIA's involvement in the British-American animated version of Orwell's famously antitotalitarian novella. While Leab's carefully researched book answers many questions about production financing and editorial changes to the barnyard fable, it leaves others unanswered in its sympathetic defense of Orwell's complex political legacy.

Orwell holds a prominent position in the cultural history of the Cold War. His death in 1950 at the age of forty-six meant that he did not live to see its full manifestation politically and culturally, but even while he was alive he saw his last novels—*Animal Farm* and 1984—embraced by the American and British governments as useful for anti-communist propaganda. The U.S. State Department sponsored the translation and distribution of the books in more than thirty different languages. Orwell himself wrote the introduction to the Ukrainian translation of *Animal Farm* and lent support to the clandestine distribution of a Russian version within the Soviet Union. The extensive dissemination of both novels brought international attention to Orwell's writing and secured his place in the literary pantheon. According to British film historian Tony Shaw, Orwell was valuable to Cold War propagandists because his commitment to social-democratic ideals made him seem like less of an anticommunist fanatic and therefore more palatable to liberals and leftists. His lucid prose also made him more accessible to readers, even to children in the case of *Animal Farm*. The 1953 animated film adaptation had the potential to bring the book's political message to an even wider public. The revelation in 1996 that Orwell had supplied names of Stalin supporters and fellow travelers to British Foreign Office's Information Research Department (IRD) further complicated his relationship to Cold War ideology and disillusioned many of his former supporters.

Although Watergate coconspirator E. Howard Hunt first revealed the CIA's financial support for *Animal Farm* in his memoirs, Leab takes issue with other critics, including Shaw, who rely too heavily on Hunt's colorful and ultimately false account. Leab, editor of the journal *American Communist History* and author of *I Was a Communist for the FBI* and many articles on Hollywood's Cold War films, knows this period well. His thorough research uncovered correspondence and financial information in archives in both the United States and England that allowed him to compile the most complete accounting to date of the film's production. Even though the CIA itself denied access to its archives, the book still provides a wealth of detailed information on the process of translating the novel to the animated screen.

Producer Louis de Rochement plays a



central role in this account. De Rochement, the producer of the patriotic *March of Time* newsreel series, already knew how to exploit his government contacts well in order to make Hollywood features like *The House on 92nd St.* and *Boomerang*. In addition to using a style that used realistic location shooting, De Rochement was known for dealing with contemporary politics in his films. His Cold War political views made him attractive to those in the CIA-affiliated cultural organizations interested in filming *Animal Farm*. Interestingly, he chose to work with British animators John Halas and Joy Batchelor instead of better-known American animation companies, because he felt they could be trusted. Their prize-winning cartoon about the Marshall Plan, *Robinson Charley*, produced for the Economic Cooperation Agency (ECA), demonstrated their abilities in creating animation with a message. De Rochement's *March of Time* associate, Lothar Wolfe, had also worked well with the British animators when he was involved with the ECA. According to Leab, they knew little of the funding source for the film, although he believes that they must "have surmised the source." Without covert CIA funding, it seems unlikely that the animated version would have been made. It was the first British feature-length cartoon on a serious subject and its commercial prospects were uncertain.

Even though cultural front organizations sponsored by the CIA had supported the distribution of the book, they saw a chance in the film's production to "refine" the message to make it even more critical of Stalin. The script received input from within the CIA and drafts were even sent to the FBI. Eventually it went through nine revisions before the final version. De Rochemont

acquiesced to the sponsors' desire to leave no doubt that Napoleon represented a tyrannical Stalin who ruled by violence. There was less interest in Orwell's original theme of animals working together communally for the collective good than in the pigs' brutal seizure of power. The biggest disputes were over the ending.

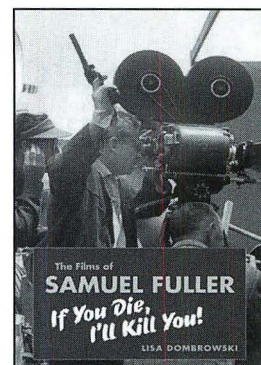
The CIA "investors," as Leab calls them, wanted it to be more upbeat than Orwell's original, in which the pigs undermine the idealism of the animals' rebellion. While Batchelor wanted to remain true to Orwell's criticism of both the humans and the animals, the financiers won out.

The meticulous research provides a very rich historical backdrop to examine the film adaptation. Occasionally Leab digresses into trivial details (CIA representative Carlton Alsop's marital background, for example) that are distracting rather than illuminating. The book would also have benefited by a list of abbreviations since the acronyms for all of the organizations (IRD, OPC, PSB, etc.) mentioned can often be confusing—especially since both British and American agencies are referred to. In addition, although Leab has produced a well-researched historical document, he steers clear of much discussion of the political controversies over Orwell's work from the left. He leaves no doubt, however, that he believes Orwell was justified in everything that he did and discounts his involvement with the IRD. As Leab himself admits, the film was only one small part of a very large propaganda campaign that is of interest because of Orwell's notoriety and because of the covert nature of its funding. Readers interested in a broader perspective, and one more critical of Orwell's participation in Cold War propaganda, would also do well to consult Tony Shaw's *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001) and Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2000). While they may not have all of Leab's particulars, these books provide a fascinating perspective on both Britain's involvement in the Cold War, as well as a more complete picture of the CIA and the cultural politics of the time.—Susan Ryan

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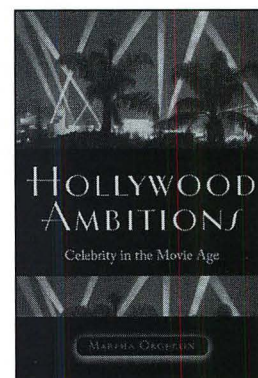


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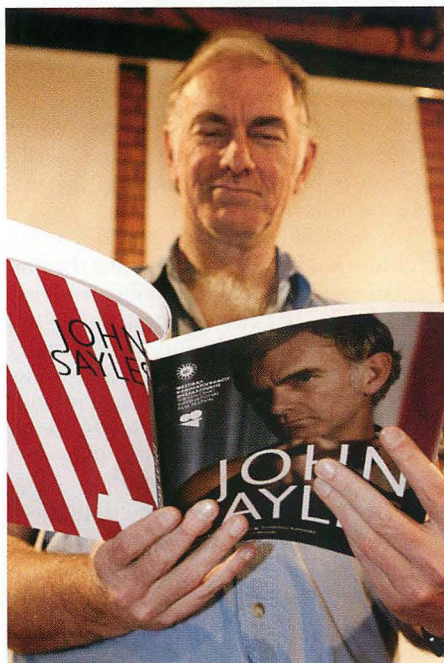
COMMUNIQUÉS

The Thessaloniki International Film Festival

by Dan Georgakas

Only a few film festivals serve as genuine international showcases that can catapult a film to worldwide visibility. With the number of festivals around the world multiplying rapidly, the majority, by necessity, must have narrower national or film niche mandates. Since its onset, the Thessaloniki International Film Festival has focused on the artistic rather than commercial dimensions of film with special attention to first and second features. Closely linked to this mandate is the support given to regional cinema by cosponsoring script development via the Balkan Film Fund, presenting new productions in the annual Balkan Survey, and offering the Crossroads Co-Production Forum for Mediterranean and Balkan films. The festival's efforts to enrich the national film culture in Greece, increasingly have gone beyond simply presenting new Greek films and retrospectives.

Eleven master classes were presented at the most recent festival by world renowned actors, directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, and producers. That the majority of



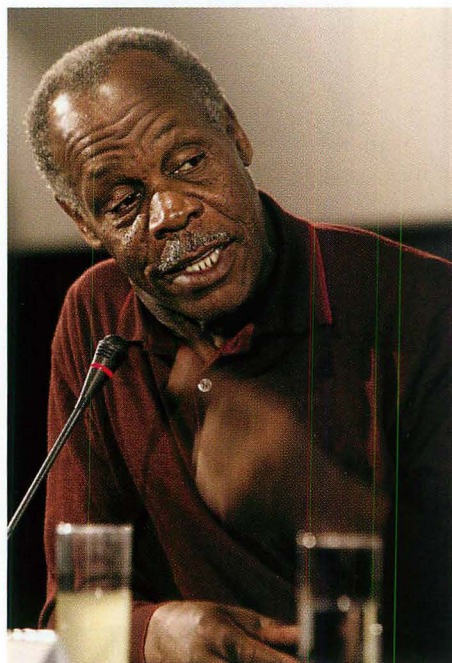
Sayles checks out the book on his films published by the Thessaloniki Film Festival.

presenters were not directors was a subtle reminder to the director-centered Greek film public of the collaborative aspects of filmmaking. Topics addressed ranged from the problematics associated with making low-budget indies to the thinking that pervades Hollywood. Constantine Giannaris,

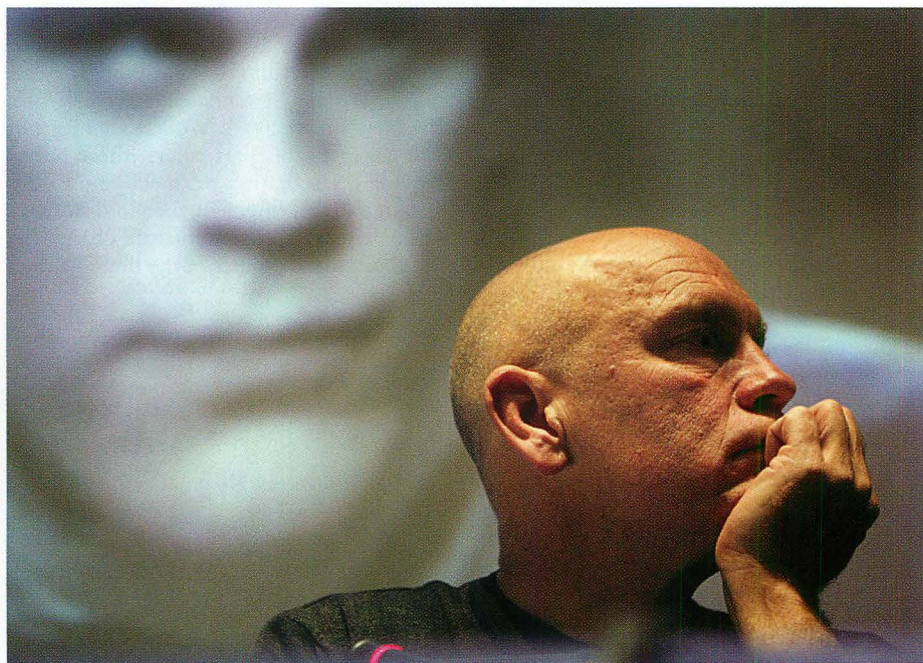
for example, spoke about the making, early in his career, of a documentary that examined the relationship between Constantine Cavafy's poetry and his sexuality. Discussing an entirely different kind of filmmaking, Jim Gianopulos, head of Fox Entertainment, spoke about the financing and planning for blockbusters like *Titanic* and *Moulin Rouge*, commercial flops like *Solaris* and *Master and Commander*, and unconventional hits like *The Full Monty* and *Borat*. In regard to the latter two films, Gianopulos explained that Fox invests in such projects only when it thinks the subject matter or format cannot be found on television.

Four round-table discussions had an equally wide range of interests. The topics addressed were contemporary Spanish cinema, the work of film archivists, film criticism on the Internet, and the possible role of cinema in the elimination of violence against women. The Just Talking sessions chaired by Angelike Contis every afternoon at 5:00 were more informal. Most participants were involved with first or second works being screened at the festival. They chatted with one another and took questions from the audience on how they had overcome various obstacles to get their films made and distributed. Like the events already mentioned and the daily press conferences, the Just Talking sessions were free of charge and open to the general public.

Giving permanent expression to some of



Danny Glover gave a Master Class on Acting at the Thessaloniki Festival.



John Malkovich, with his image looming on a screen behind him, gave another Master Class on Acting at the Thessaloniki Festival.



A Greek soccer hooligan in Thanos Anastopoulos's *Correction*.

the festival retrospectives were a number of bilingual (Greek and English) publications. Of particularly high quality was a book simply titled *John Sayles* edited by Konstantinos Kontovrakis and Despina Mouzaki, the festival director. A variety of interviews, critical pieces, essays by Sayles, and excellent treatments of each of his sixteen features make it the single best source on Sayles available anywhere. Three titles were added to the ongoing Film Pad pamphlet series: *Spanish Cinema in the New Century: A Contemporary Look*; *The Films of Nae Caranfil*; and *In a Dark Passage: Film Noir in Greek Cinema*. The writing in some of these pamphlets is a bit florid at times, but all succeed in delivering considerable insights into their topics. The Greek *film noir* essays are the first extended comments in English on the culture that produced classic Greek *noirs* such as *Murder Backstage* (1960) and *The Man on the Train* (1958).

The response to these efforts to broaden film culture in Greece was quite strong. Students from Thessaloniki's Artistotle University, the only Greek university that offers a

formal course of study in film, made up the bulk of the festival's audience. Many screenings were totally sold out, but students often elected to stand in the back of the theater or sit on the staircases. Particularly popular with younger festivalgoers was the Greek Digital Wave section. Unlike last year's presentations, most of the digital work presented was by experienced filmmakers such as Lucia Rikaki and Tassos Boulmetis.

Despite numerous tributes and the educational outreach just noted, the festival has not been diverted from its core mission of presenting first and second features. One of the most remarkable of these was *PVC-1*, a Colombian-Greek-U.S. production that won four awards, including a People's Choice Prize. The director/coscriptwriter of this Spanish-language film is Greek-born Spiros Stathouloupoulos, who grew up in Colombia but has now established a film company in Los Angeles. *PVC-1* is shot in one continuous take and deals with a woman in Colombia who is forced into a collar bomb by criminals seeking ransom. Despite a poorly acted first ten minutes, the film is far more successful in developing a coherent story with compelling characters than the famed one-take *Russian Ark* (2002). Two other impressive debut features were from Iran and China, Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* and Cal Shangjun's *The Red Awn*. *Buddha* focuses on a six-year-old Afghan girl living beneath the statues of the Buddha destroyed by the Taliban as she confronts obstacles in her quest for literacy. *Red Awn*, which won the Golden Alexander, follows the quest of a man, who has returned to his hometown after a five-year absence to reclaim the affection of a son who has had him officially declared dead by the local ministry.

Among the new Greek productions, the lavish *El Greco*, which has broken all domestic attendance records, is a sure bet to please international audiences attracted to films that deal with the lives of famous painters.



A Greek *film noir*, *The Man on the Train* (1958), was screened at Thessaloniki.

Also capable of finding an international audience is *First Time Godfather*, a warm-hearted spoof of political dynasties that has a delightful ecological twist. The script is based on a novel by Nikos Papandreou (son and grandson of two Greek prime ministers and brother of the leader of Greece's major opposition party) and direction is by the prolific Olga Malea. A finely honed script cowritten by director Thanos Anastopoulos also distinguishes *Correction*, an intense drama concerning the murder of an Albanian immigrant by a Greek. Unfortunately, *Correction* assumes knowledge of contemporary Greek life that may make it somewhat impenetrable for non-Greek audiences.

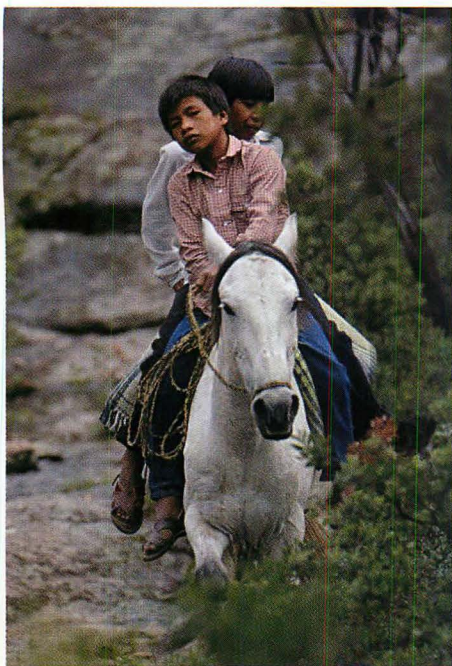
Thessaloniki, which will soon be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, remains steadfast in its dedication to remaining both an international site for filmmakers at the onset of their careers and a leading force in Greek cultural life. Having set a new attendance record in 2007, the festival seems to have more public support in Greece than ever before. ■

For more information on the Thessaloniki International Film Festival, visit www.filmfestival.gr.

The Gijón International Film Festival

by Dennis West

Establishing a film festival decades ago in Franco's Spain must have been challenging, given the authoritarian right-wing dictator's well known penchant for tightly censoring activities in the cultural sphere. Cinephiles in Spain's northern coastal city of Gijón found the solution in 1963, when they established an annual film festival aimed at children. Forty-five years later, with the Caudillo evermore moldering in his grave, the event has grown into an eclectic international film festival. It still retains, however, one prominent competitive showcase—*Enfants Terribles*—that presents new international films judged of special interest to primary- and secondary-school students. And flock to *Enfants Terribles* the young people and children of the region did, to see provocative new work, such as Estonian filmmaker Ilmar Raag's *Klass*, an *Elephant*-influenced and stylistically edgy study of savage bullying in a high-school setting. These 15,000 strong student spectators did not simply watch movies; they actively debated the works and mingled with the filmmakers themselves—and with their votes they even selected the section's winning film. This strong didactic emphasis, then, is the Gijón Festival's most unusual characteristic.



Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas's *Cochochi*, on Raramuri society in Mexico.



A scene from Pere Portabella's nonnarrative, experimental film, *The Silence Before Bach*, in which the Spanish director attempts to develop "a new cinematic language."

Gijón is a mid-sized international film festival; nevertheless, its Official Competition of new features sparked with fresh, innovative, and diverse projects from new filmmakers as well as renowned *auteurs*. Talented new faces in the competition included the young Latin Americans Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas, who presented their first fiction feature, the Mexican *Cochochi*. The multifaceted Cárdenas and Guzmán personally wrote, photographed, and directed this human-interest-laden road movie, which captured the International Critics Prize.

Cochochi's narrative thread is slender—two somewhat clueless but likable indigenous sixth graders search northern Mexico's spectacular Sierra Tarahumara for a lost horse—but the social vision is vast as viewers are treated to an engaging tour of Raramuri (a. k. a. Tarahumara) society today as it teeters precariously between the dominant, modern Spanish-language culture and the native folkways, between the horse and the truck. The filmmakers' success is built

on a no-nonsense, low-budget mode of production that meshes well with a measured, straightforward artistic approach. This approach integrates convincing performances by nonprofessional actors—including child actors who never play too cute—with a carefully composed, landscape-saturated color cinematography that excels in capturing the characters in their social and natural environments. Guzmán and Cárdenas also succeed with their soundtrack, which alternates sparse dialogs in Spanish and Raramuri to reflect linguistically the growing bilingualism and biculturalism now impacting this indigenous community. *Cochochi*, then, offers one of Latin American cinema's most moving portraits of native American societies in transition in this current era of globalization.

Two prominent Spanish *auteurs* participated in the festival with their latest works. Although Pere Portabella may be best known internationally as a producer (e. g., Buñuel's *Viridiana* in 1961) he is also a leading director. His latest feature as director-

producer-coscreenwriter is the experimental *The Silence Before Bach*, an ambitiously conceived, generally nonnarrative artistic collage in which Portabella sets himself the astonishing intellectual-esthetic task of assessing—"in a new cinematic language" no less—the socio-historical importance of Johan Sebastian Bach and his oeuvre for European societies. The Official Jury stumbled when it awarded only a Special Prize to this stunning example of conceptual cinema, which in my opinion merited the Grand Prize.

Catalan *auteur* José Luis Guerín's esthetic project in the nearly dialog-free fiction feature *In the City of Sylvia* (screened out of competition) is no less ambitious: to make viewers contemplate, imagine, and dream about urban settings and urban dwellers and their lives in profoundly new ways as the camera realistically, or innocuously, or mysteriously, or in a documentarylike fashion follows in a foreign city (Strasbourg) a romantic, dreamy young artist—played by a young Alain Delon lookalike—as he searches for a beautiful woman he knew years ago. The great themes here are seeing, memory, hope, desire, the power of imagination, and the search for the ideal; and the cultural influences range widely from Petrarch to Goethe to Hitchcock. Portabella and Guerín have not travelled well in the English-speaking world; but readers should know that their latest works are profoundly original stylistic experiments in exploring the artistic potential of cinema—works worth seeing in any format as soon as possible in 2008.

As is Mexican screenwriter-director Carlos Reygadas's new fiction feature, *Silent Light*. This drama powerfully explores the emotional havoc inflicted on a tight-knit Mennonite community in northern Mexico in the present day when a respected male



A Mennonite family in Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Light*.



Catalan filmmaker José Luis Guerín's *In the City of Sylvia*.

"pillar of the community" launches head-first and tumultuously into an adulterous affair. *Silent Light* features extensive on-location shooting amongst the endogamous Mennonite communities of Chihuahua; and the actors, who are nonprofessionals, speak their own language which is, according to the director, a still vibrant dialect of sixteenth-century Dutch. Reygadas in his comments stressed his reliance on standard realist approaches, such as natural-light cinematography and the long take, the latter a stylistic feature he shares with Guerín's *In the City of Sylvia*. Both directors seek to explore the imaginative and emotional potential as the camera rolls longer than expected. This visual approach I personally found mesmerizing, even occasionally uncanny, in *Silent Light*. The film, however, came under considerable fire from certain critics who charged that the long takes are frequently downright boring; that the filmmaker shamelessly traffics in cheap, sensationalistic mysticism (details withheld to protect first-time viewers); and that, anyway, the whole business reeks of warmed-over Dreyer (a key influence that Reygadas freely admits). One thing appears certain after viewing the festival's complete Reygadas retrospective: the Mexican *enfant terrible* seems determined to become one of the

world's most controversial and imaginative cinéastes.

As the above examples suggest, Gijón programmers succeeded in providing an impressive lineup of important new work, though inevitably a few full-thudding duds did intrude. Overall, however, this forty-fifth edition proved itself an international film festival with an edge, and with plenty for a wide range of viewers—from eager schoolchildren to somewhat jaded festival-goers, such as yours truly. ■

For more information on the Gijón International Film Festival, visit www.gijonfilmfestival.com.

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Contributors

Paul Arthur, author of *Line of Sight: Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*, has recently completed a book on Nick Broomfield, to be published by the University of Illinois Press ... **Karen Backstein** has taught film studies at several universities in the New York City area ... **Michael Bronski** teaches Film, Women's and Gender Studies and Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College and his latest book is *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulp* ... **John Calhoun** is a librarian at the New York Public Library's Donnell Media Center and a free-lance writer about film ... **Robert Cashill**, a *Cineaste* Associate, blogs at www.robertcashill.blogspot.com ... **Doug Dibbern** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Cinema Studies Department at New York University ... **Thomas Doherty** is Professor of American Studies at Brandeis University and the author of *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* ... **Dan Georgakas** is author *My Detroit: Growing Up Greek and American in Motor City* ... **Sidney Gottlieb** is Professor of Media Studies at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT ... **Michael Gray** is the film critic for *The Irish Echo* and author of *Stills, Reels and Rushes: Ireland and the Irish in 20th Century Cinema* ... **Rahul Hamid** is a *Cineaste* Assistant Editor ... **Andrew Hedden** lives in Seattle and contributes regularly to Lucidscreening.com ... **Robert Koehler** writes film criticism for *Variety* and *Cinema Scope* ... **Christopher Long** is a free-lance writer and critic for DVD Town and DVD Beaver.com ... **Cynthia Lucia** teaches film studies at Rider University and is the author of *Framing Female Lawyers: Women on Trial in Film* ... **Louis Menashe** teaches Russian history and film at Polytechnic University in Brooklyn ... **Jonathan Murray** teaches in the Centre for Visual and Cultural Studies at Edinburgh College of Art and is currently writing a book on Scottish cinema ... **Tony Pipolo**, a psychoanalyst in private practice, recently completed a book on Robert Bresson ... **Richard Porton** is currently editing an anthology on film festivals for Wallflower Press ... **Leonard Quart** is Professor Emeritus of Cinema Studies at The College of Staten Island ... **Jared Rapfogel** is a New York-based film critic and a regular contributor to *Senses of Cinema* and *Cinema Scope* ... **Megan Ratner** is an Associate Editor at *Bright Lights Film Journal* ... **Michelle Robinson** is a graduate student in American Studies at Boston University ... **Susan Ryan** is the Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at The College of New Jersey where she teaches classes in film studies and documentary production ... **Maria San Filippo** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Film, Television and Digital Media and of LGBT Studies at UCLA ... **Robert Sklar** teaches film at New York University and is the author of numerous books on film ... **David Sterritt** is Chairman of the National Society of Film Critics and adjunct professor at Columbia University and the Maryland Institute College of Art ... **Clifford Thompson** is the Editor of *Current Biography* and his writing on film, books and jazz has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Film Quarterly* and *Black Issues Book Review* ... **Dennis West** teaches in the Department of Theatre and Film at the University of Idaho ... **Alexander Zevin**, a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, is currently adapting Louis-Ferdinand Céline's medical thesis into a screenplay. ■

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LETTERS

Screenplays & Definitions

I would like to expand on some of the comments in Brian Frye's excellent review in your last issue of J. J. Murphy's book, *Me and You and Memento and Fargo*, on how independent screenplays work (*Cineaste*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1). First, I want to commend Frye for actually writing about the book at hand and its argument rather than making vague references to other books in the field or the book the reviewer would have written were he the author. The major error he finds in Murphy's argument is one I would like to comment on because I see it repeatedly in numerous reviews and essays that want to talk about something Hollywood is doing consciously or unconsciously. At the crudest level, Hollywood is presented as a den of conspiracy and at another crude level, a domain peopled by those who don't know what they really feel or think.

The major logical problem with such arguments is that these conclusions are usually based on a relatively small number of films that, sure enough, fit the thesis at hand. I think it is legitimate to argue that there may be a cluster of films with similar views or even a mini-trend, but you can't categorize an industry pumping out hundreds of films annually by citing a handful of films that suit your argument. And of course, we know that financiers always want to know what sold well last year when planning what to fund this year, leading to clusters of films with related themes. This is less a conspiracy or mindlessness than a desire to make a safe investment.

I am also quite perturbed about the sloppy language in so much film criticism, even occasionally in your well-edited pages. In the case of this book review, independent films are not defined. Clearly one has to be independent of something and, in the case of film, the term "independent film" originally arose to describe films not financed by the studios. The motives for making such films were usually artistic in nature, often reflecting the views of performers who had the funds to make films of their liking or filmmakers at the onset of their careers who simply did not have access to studio funding.

In that context, an indie script could be a traditional three-act (and often was) just as a studio script need not be traditional. Films like *Salt of the Earth* or *Eight Men Out* are clearly independent and clearly three-act using many studio conventions albeit for far different thematic ends than most studio films. In regard to the disdain for three-act and catharsis, everyone is free to have their esthetic preferences, but I would note that Sophocles has had a rather long run.

Frye casually says film is a visual medium. Gosh, the talkies came into being some seven decades ago, making this an audiovisual medium. I'm not being silly by making this observation, only suggesting that words and sound are a mighty component of most films, a fact often lost in the inflation of images and crude auteurism. Sound today is often just sound effects to be sure, but even that makes it audio-

visual. Put another way, paintings don't talk, they are a purely visual medium. More broadly, film critics often seem to repeat sound bites and givens as often as our mainstream reviewers.

Let me end by saying how much I appreciate the space *Cineaste* devotes to serious book reviews. I come away from many of them disturbed by the argument being posed by the critic or wishing some aspects of the review were more detailed. I understand your space limitations, but maybe more readers should be writing to expand on or comment on the arguments advanced or critiqued in the book reviews (and film reviews too, of course). And when you print a stinker, you should be called out for it.

Eliot Fremont
Portland, ME

A Film Journalism Must-Read

We are happy to inform you that David Archibald's article, "Correcting Historical Lies: An Interview with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty" (*Cineaste*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, Spring 2007) has been selected on our list of "40 Film Journalism Must-Reads & Sees of 2007."

Our editorial board writes, "David Archibald's interview with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty on *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* starts out slow, Laverty carrying most of the weight of interest. 'There's that revealing phrase by Henry Kissinger—highlighted by the wonderful historian Howard Zinn—that 'History is the memory of the states.' It's a notion I reject. It denies history as the lived experience of ordinary people," Laverty explains as to the reason he neglected to model his characters after historical hallmarks.

It's only later that Archibald manages to hit a chord with the director. "Critics might suggest that the film is not politically balanced," he says.

"...Do you have to be fair to the oppressor?" Loach replies. "To quote Churchill, 'Do you have to be fair between the fire brigade and the fire?' The idea of balance is wholly skewed—as it always is, because the British stood for oppression to democracy, for oppression of the people, for the brutal destruction of their homes in many cases and their lives. So I don't feel the need to be balanced between the oppressor and the oppressed."

There's only one word for an exchange of this nature—"Brilliant."

We heartily congratulate you on the strength of your work and sincerely thank you for it.

ShortEnd Magazine Editor
Noralil Ryan Fores

Another Must-Read!

We are happy to inform you that Roy Grundmann's *Cineaste* article, "Auteur de Force: Michael Haneke's 'Cinema of Glaciation,'" has been selected on our list of "40 Film Journalism Must-Reads & Sees of 2007."

Our editorial board writes, "No two ways around it, *Cineaste* is dense and academic, to both its credit and to its fault. It's a magazine run by smart people who don't even pretend to cater to the average. Each article is a bit of a marathon, Roy Grundmann's article on Michael Haneke no exception. Breaking down the controversial director's work one film after the other, Grundmann studies with a keen eye the themes and influences on films including *The Seventh Continent*, *Benny's Video* and *Funny Games*. A well-written and engaging analysis, it's a bookmarker article, one to be read in-depth and with pleasure over a longer than average period of time."

We heartily congratulate you on the strength of your work and sincerely thank you for it.

ShortEnd Magazine Editor
Noralil Ryan Fores

The Cineaste Editors reply:

Our congratulations are also extended to David Archibald and Roy Grundmann. Their features were, *ShortEnd* explains, "culled from more than 300 articles and reviews," from such periodicals as *Moving Pictures*, *Paste*, *Filmmaker*, *Esquire*, *The Village Voice*, *The Believer*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Film Comment*, and represent "the most timely, engaged, in-depth and entertaining film journalism, in both word and image, from the last year." *ShortEnd Magazine: Thoughts on Independent Film* is at www.shortendmagazine.com

Better Late Than Never

I travelled extensively in the Fall and have not been keeping up with my reading. It was only recently, over the last few weeks, that I caught up with all the film magazines that had piled up here meanwhile. I was hugely impressed by the articles about the 40th anniversary of *Cineaste*, not least as I never really thought that you have had such a long (and glorious) history. After all, it seems you started publication when I was just 7 years old, going to my first school day in Bulgaria.

Impressive!

Like many of the friends from my generation, I am a great fan of *Cineaste*. I believe you are doing a tremendous public service, and hope to see you continue with the magazine for many more years.

Prof. Dina Iordanova
Director of the Centre for Film Studies
University of St. Andrews, Scotland

Letters to the Editors

Letters of comment from our readers, whether positive or negative, are always welcome, since we consider them as a way to continue the debate, refine critical perceptions, or correct our mistakes. Please try to keep your letters to no more than 200 to 300 words. — **The Editors**



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SHORT TAKES

The Church on Dauphine Street

Ann Hedreen and Rustin Thompson have subtitled their film "One Katrina Story," presumably to reflect their modest resolve to shed light on a particular face of a national tragedy as much as to signal their eschewal of the wrenching, epic aspirations of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*. In contrast to that film, *The Church on Dauphine Street* is a story about a local resurrection: the difficult process of rebuilding Blessed Selos, a church in New Orleans's Upper Ninth Ward that was heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina, as were the lives of many in its trilingual parish whose members include the city's deaf community and Spanish-speaking immigrants. The majority of the film belongs to Blessed Selos's Father Joseph Benson and to Arthine Vicks, an ex-Marine and two-time "runaway bride" who leads the deaf choir and is Jill-of-all-trades. But Hedreen and Thompson also chart the unlikely and inspiring encounters on which the church's restoration depends. Volunteers from Seattle led by businessman Jack van Hartesvelt, skilled union workers from New Orleans, and members of the congregation who wrestle with uncertain futures all cross paths at Blessed Selos. The documentary is at its most luminous when they tell their stories, when Vicks recounts the miraculous rescue of precious church relics from a fire, or when church members silently sign hymns at the deaf choir practice. Yet the film is frustratingly overnarrated and overscored. The filmmakers' apologies for the community's belief in miracles seem unwarranted, and sometimes the film's honesty seems formulaic rather than candid. In these moments, *Dauphine Street* is too restrained to allow the fears and the faith of its subjects to become palpable. (Distributed by White Noise Productions, 5454 57th Avenue S., Seattle, WA 98118, telephone (206) 723-8228, www.whitenoiseproductions.com, DVDs available for purchase at www.onekatrinafilms.com)—**Michelle Robinson**

For the Bible Tells Me So

To shed light on the religious right's tenuous claims that homosexuality is "an abomination in the eyes of God," filmmaker Daniel Karlsake forgoes Moore/Gore-style preaching to the choir in favor of preaching a sermon of tolerance directly to Bible thumpers. Karlsake's approach—deploying reform theologians to dispel biblical literalists' interpretations (or manipulations) of scriptures by placing them back into the idiom and cultural/historical context where they belong—takes "using the master's tools" to new heights of meaning. Though their revisionist insights are illuminating, neither the Bible's authority nor faith-based values are really questioned. The standard documentary format of talking heads accompanied by heartstring-yanking music is unimaginative, though presumably intended to win over its ostensible target audience—families of gays and lesbians, nearly all of whom harbor legitimate fears of being disowned. To underscore the cost of intolerance, one mother recounts how her Focus on the Family-fueled tough love provoked her lesbian daughter's suicide. The five families profiled include that of the first openly gay Anglican bishop alongside model liberals, the Gephardts. Save a token African-American

family, everyone is white, Christian, monogamously and tastefully gay (i.e. they don't "flaunt" it), and apparently unwavering in their faith. Whether out of deference to his target audience's belief that there's no chance of "catching" homosexuality or to avoid complicating the issue, Karlsake ignores bisexuality and anything that might trouble dominant culture's binary understanding of gender and sexuality. As a result, the film takes such binary logic as gospel and refortifies the institutions (marriage, family, organized religion) that uphold it. (Distributed by First Run Features, 630 Ninth Avenue., New York, New York 10036, telephone (212) 243-0600, info@firstrunfeatures.com, www.firstrunfeatures.com)—**Maria San Filippo**

Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037

A tribute to what may become a lost art, Ben Niles's documentary traces the production process of a single Steinway piano, which takes one year and in which 450 craftsmen handle 12,000 parts. Located in Queens by the street named after it, the company prides itself on applying the same non-mechanized methods used 100 years ago, and on the result—the singular "personality" of each instrument. Perhaps the only manufacturer left of this kind, Steinway makes 2000 pianos a year while mass-producing competitors turn out 100 a day. The film celebrates this uniqueness by paralleling the tasks of the craftsmen with professionals like Harry Connick, Jr., Hank Jones, and Lang Lang trying out the finished products. From the wood technologist who selects the lumber to the final tone inspector, each demonstrates a sensitive touch and hearing to match those of the artists of the keyboard. As one explains, if every worker is just one-hundredth of an inch off drilling holes or planing the wood, it affects the tone of the piano. Showing concert masters Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Hélène Grimaud experimenting until they find a specimen "responsive" to their individual touch brings this observation home. But in this romantic portrait, questions loom. The hands and minds of the workers we see, some of them having been at it for forty plus years, are intensely engaged in the smallest details—the opposite of alienated labor. But what of the others? Are first-generation immigrants hired mainly to keep costs down? While the viewer is seduced by this loving affirmation of the handcrafted in the age of the postindustrial, one wonders about the working conditions for everyone. (Distributed by Plow Productions, LLC, 283 Bleeker St., Suite 4A, New York, New York 10014, telephone (212) 242-0508, info@plowproductions.com)—**Tony Pipolo**

Peter Seeger: The Power of Song

Is there an American musical artist more lovable than Pete Seeger, or more deserving of the honors heaped on him by institutions (such as the Kennedy Center) and fellow performers? Certainly, the House on Un-American Activities Committee didn't care for him. His left-leaning (read: Communist) politics earned him a congressional contempt citation for refusing to cooperate with the Committee in 1955. (The charge was later thrown out by the courts.) His dream of Johnny Apple-

seeding the U.S. labor movement with songs celebrating "work and freedom" was never fully realized, but he's had some astonishing successes in his long career, chronicled in Jim Brown's often lyrical documentary with generous helpings of music from Pete and his peers. His family and a parade of stars (including Bob Dylan and Arlo Guthrie) help tell the story. Historian Ron Radosh reminisces about studying banjo with Pete, but his critical remarks on Seeger's fellow traveling are absent. We might have learned that Seeger's voice was silent about victims of Stalinist and post-Stalinist repression, but rain isn't allowed to fall on this parade. Political blind spots aside, Seeger's activism for peace, civil rights, and the environment are as monumental as his music. Now in his late eighties, he's shown handing out leaflets against Bush's war in Iraq. The "folk revival" has a lineage going back to Pete's recordings, instruction manuals, and appearances at schools and summer camps across the land (important when the blacklist kept him off radio and television). Artists as diverse as Bruce Springsteen and Neil Diamond acknowledge his influence—and the millions of us who attended his concerts and listened to his recordings still feel the power of his songs. (Distributed by the Weinstein Company, 345 Hudson Street, 13th Floor, New York, New York 10014, phone (646) 862-3400, www.weinsteinco.com)—**Louis Menashe**

Plagues and Pleasures on the Salton Sea

According to one local resident, the Salton Sea is "California's version of the French Riviera." A neighbor disagrees: "It's the greatest sewer the world has ever seen." No wonder Chris Metzler and Jeff Springer tapped John Waters to narrate their bizarre, occasionally poignant documentary about one of America's greatest engineering mistakes. Located fifty miles south of Palm Springs, the Salton Sea shouldn't even exist. In 1905, thanks to heavy rains and poorly planned irrigation, the Colorado River overflowed and flooded the Imperial Valley. By the time the river breach was plugged, the water had collected at the lowest point and formed the Salton Sea, a gigantic saline lake in the middle of the California desert. This mistake grew into a thriving resort once dubbed "the fishing capital of the world." Even "the rich folks from L.A." spent weekends at the Sea, enjoying boat races and fishing contests. But what mankind created, nature soon destroyed. A series of natural disasters in the Seventies flooded the lake, drove away tourists, and destroyed the economy and the ecology. No more boat races today, just "Dead birds. Dead fish. Dead everything." On the surface, it's a tale of faded glory, but the filmmakers find inspiration from the colorful locals (think *Vernon, Florida*) who defy the almost universally negative press coverage of the Salton Sea as a toxic dump. Sure, it's got "the odor problem" but it's also a natural wetlands refuge for several bird populations. Nonetheless, the Salton Sea's days may be numbered, even though many crusaders (including the late Sonny Bono) have battled to preserve it. As one woman states: "Bleak is the word." (Distributed by The Cinema Guild, 115 West 30th Street, Suite 800, New York, New York 10001, telephone (212) 685-6242, info@cinemaguild.com, www.cinemaguild.com)—**Christopher Long**

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